

Strings Attached by **HannahBerrie**

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Summary: In which high school students Mike, Lucas, Max, Dustin, and Will need a new lead singer for their classic-rock garage band. They hold auditions, but only one student tries out: El, the new loner kid from Chicago. What follows? Romance, friendship, drama, Yoko-Onoing, and one hell of a start to Junior year.

1. Where the Band Begins Junior Year

[A/N]: Hey, everyone! Welcome back to yet another high school au that takes place in 1985! Some preliminary notes about this AU:

- For the sake of not recreating Everybody Talks, El does not have powers and Hopper is her biological dad
- Max grew up in Hawkins with the boys
- Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan all go to college together at Indiana University
- As of right now, this story is going to be 9 chapters long!

And I think that's it! Enjoy!

"Don't freak out."

"I'm not freaking out!" Dustin huffs. "I'm acting completely normal!"

Steve gives him a skeptical look. Though he doesn't say anything, Dustin can already tell what he's thinking. It's probably something along the lines of *'you've never acted normal one day of your life, Dustin,'* or *'you're obviously freaking out about the fact that Stacy just walked across the parking lot, Dustin.'*

They're in the Hawkins High parking lot, seated inside Steve's car. The windows are rolled down, allowing the warm early September air to filter through. The surrounding area is a chaotic blur of action and sound. Yellow school buses are pulling to a screeching stop, some asshole senior kid is blasting music from his car's speakers (it's not even good music, either), and students are rushing up to each other with the usual excited first-day-of-school chatter.

Even though this is Dustin's third year of high school now, he still feels the back-to-school jitters hit him hard — mainly because this past summer had been so great. Max and Mike had gotten their licenses, as well as their own vehicles, and they consequently spent most of the summer driving around with all their friends and just doing whatever they wanted. What they wanted evidently included a lot of beach days that smelt of suntan lotion, late night backyard

band sessions accented with crickets chirps and mosquito bites, brain-freeze inducing Slurpees from the local 7-Eleven, and oozing chili-cheese fries from *Benny's Burgers*.

After all of that, coming back to school kind of seems like a punishment of some sort. Entering the high school feels like an increasingly daunting task the longer Dustin stays seated in the passenger's seat of Steve's car.

The fact that Stacy, aka, the girl of his dreams, just walked by doesn't really help his nerves either.

"Just go talk to her," Steve suggests with a shrug.

"Talk to her!?" Dustin exclaims, voice rising with as much indignation as it probably would if Steve had just asked him to grow a third leg.

"Yeah," Steve replies, still infuriatingly nonchalant, "You know, talking. With words. Just like you're doing with me right now."

"You know it's not the same," Dustin huffs, slumping down in the passenger's seat.

When Dustin was in 6th grade, his mom hired Steve to be his babysitter, and the two boys had been inseparable ever since. Even now that Steve attended Indiana University, he still made time to visit Dustin on weekends and important days (like today, the first day of Dustin's Junior year).

Steve was like the brother Dustin never had; talking to him was easy. They had their own amiable series of inside jokes and shared memories that was, according to Max, practically their own dorky language. On the other hand, talking to Stacy, one of the most popular girls in school, was nearly impossible.

"I know it's not the same," Steve admits, "But it's not impossible."

Dustin swears that Steve can read his mind. He's accused Steve of being a telepath before, but Steve always just tells Dustin that he needs to stop reading so much 'nerdy shit.'

"Then how should I talk to her?" Dustin asks, turning to look over at

Steve curiously.

"Just keep it casual," Steve instructs, moving his hand in a slow, forward-moving motion.

"Casual," Dustin echoes with a nod.

"Casual," Steve repeats, "Like you don't care."

"But I do care!"

"Yeah, but you don't want her to know that, man."

"*Oh*," Dustin nods slowly like he totally understands (he doesn't).

Steve gives him a reassuring nod. "You got this, man," he assures Dustin, "This is gonna be your year. Remember what we talked about?"

Dustin sighs, thinking back to the back-to-school pep talk he'd gotten from Steve over the summer. "Junior year is gonna be my bitch," he recites dutifully.

"You're damn right it is," Steve nods again, holding out his hand, "Now go get 'em."

Dustin smiles gratefully as he reaches out and grasps Steve's hand. Steve gives him a single, firm handshake and then they pull away, both ready to finally get a move on. Dustin's only got 15 minutes until the first bell rings, and Steve's got a 12:00 lecture and still has to make the 1-and-a-half hour drive back to campus.

Dustin unbuckles his seatbelt, grabs his backpack, and exits the car. His legs feel like jelly, but he just keeps reminding himself that this is going to be a year of infinite possibilities. He's finally not an underclassman anymore, he's one of the *cool* kids (by label mostly, not by social status, or anything).

He turns back to look at Steve one last time, leaning his head through the open passenger's side window. "Thanks again for driving me," Dustin smiles.

"It's no problem," Steve shrugs.

"Hopefully your brain won't explode from how boring college is," Dustin jokes.

"As long as your brain doesn't explode from how hormonal high school is," Steve jokes back, reaching a hand out to ruffle the top of Dustin's baseball cap.

A few more laughs are exchanged, Steve gives his final goodbye, and then he's pulling out of the parking lot, leaving Dustin to face Hawkins High on his own.

Dustin readjusts his hat, straightens his posture, and makes a determined beeline toward the front of the school.

Stacy is leaning up against the front wall, chatting with her best friend, Jennifer, when Dustin approaches them. Both girls have their hair pulled back with colorful scrunchies and are chewing on fluorescent pink wads of bubble gum as they talk.

"Stacy!" Dustin greets excitedly, coming to a stop in front of the girls. Wait, was that too caring-sounding? Maybe it was. Whatever— just because Steve was in college and had fancy hair didn't make him right about *everything*.

Stacy turns away from Jennifer, eyeing Dustin with slight confusion. "Hey...you!" She says through her teeth, giving Dustin a wary smile.

"Hey!" Dustin beams back.

Stacy continues to look at him like he just beamed down from another planet, or something. "Do...I know...you?" She finally asks, speaking slowly and patronizingly, as if he speaks the language from another planet too.

"It's Dustin!" Jennifer exclaims, frowning at Stacy, "Dustin Henderson!" Her tone is just as patronizing, as though this is something that Stacy should have obviously known (it is).

"Oh," Stacy replies disinterestedly, checking out her nails.

"Anyway," Dustin continues hesitantly, "How was your summer?"

"I'm sorry, but like, were we talking to you?" Stacey questions, giving him an annoyed look.

Dustin smile fades. This isn't going how he expected, to put it lightly. "I guess not," he mumbles, glancing at his feet.

"Then move along, dork," Stacey instructs, making walking motions with her fingers.

The confident, radiant high that Dustin was riding from this past summer drops as abruptly and painfully as a blind, fumbled misstep off of the edge of a cliff. Jennifer offers him an apologetic smile and a mouthed 'sorry,' but it does minimal to help him feel better. He turns away from the girls and makes his way inside the high school, which is feeling increasingly prison-like by the second.

As Dustin makes his way through the crowded hallways, shoulders slumped, he hopes that he doesn't look as upset as he feels.

He does.

Mike is waiting by their lockers, chatting with Will about their plans for the upcoming year, when he spots Dustin walking over, looking like someone just ran over his cat.

Shit, maybe someone had.

"Hey, Dustin!" Mike greets tentatively, offering Dustin a warm smile.

"Hey, guys," Dustin mumbles back, voice tired and begrudging.

Mike and Will exchange confused glances, both a little taken aback. Dustin's usually the most upbeat member of their group, so to see him so gloomy is a little unsettling.

Dustin gives a heavy sigh, so Will gives Mike a small nudge and motions for Mike to say something.

"What's going on?" Mike asks concernedly.

Dustin shrugs. "I've been back at school for like, five minutes, and things are already going to shit."

"Did something happen?" Will questions.

"I tried talking to Stacy," Dustin sighs, "And it was a disaster. She didn't even remember my name! Then she told me to walk away."

"Well, screw her then!" Mike frowns, "She's always rude to everyone anyways."

"No, she isn't!" Dustin insists.

"She kind of is," Will says hesitantly, "At least, she always is to us."

"And everyone," Mike reiterates with an eye roll. He doesn't want to tell Dustin this, since it'd probably hurt his feelings, but Mike honestly can't see what Dustin sees in someone like Stacy. Sure, she was conventionally attractive, but she always looked at Mike and his friends like she'd just smelt something really bad.

"Well, still," Dustin sighs, "I just wish she'd notice me for once. Like, actually notice me. I just...I thought this was gonna be my year, you know?"

His voice trails off as Mike and Will give him sympathetic nods.

"Do you think we can actually do it?" Dustin asks suddenly.

Mike and Will frown in confusion. "Huh?!"

"You know," Dustin shrugs, looking a little more hopeful, "Do you think this is the year we're finally going to get in relationships?"

"You know I can't," Will mumbles. Even though Will came out to his friends and family this past summer, he still doesn't want to let people at school know, let alone start dating someone publicly (if there even is someone like him in their school — Will's still a little unsure of how he's supposed to figure that out).

"Right," Dustin frowns, looking apologetic. He turns to look at Mike, who's patting Will's back comfortingly, "What about you, Mike?"

"What about me?" Mike replies.

"Do you think you're gonna get a girlfriend?"

In all honesty, Mike doesn't like to spend a lot of time thinking about his relationship status. It just makes him think of awkward, lonely middle school dances, relentless prying on behalf of his mother, and hopeless summer camp crushes that went nowhere.

"I dunno," Mike shrugs, slipping his hand away from Will, "I mean, there's no one at school that I really like, or anything."

"What about at your work?" Will asks.

Mike rolls his eyes. "I work at Radio Shack — the only people who come in are like, parents, confused old people, and—"

"Geeks like us?" Dustin finishes helpfully.

"Pretty much," Mike nods.

"Well, there's gotta be someone out there for everyone," Will says sagely, "I mean, Dustin likes Stacy, even though she's really mean."

"She's not mean!" Dustin exclaims, "I don't know why you keep saying that!"

"Because she is!" Mike points out, "She literally just brushed you off!"

"Who just brushed off Dustin?" Max asks as she walks up to the group, flanked by Lucas. Ever since Lucas and Max started dating in the 8th grade, they've practically been attached at the hip, so the rest of their friends aren't surprised in the slightest that they've arrived together.

"Who hasn't brushed off Dustin?" Lucas jokes.

Dustin gives them both a sarcastic laugh as he flips them off. "Laugh it up, fuzzballs," he gripes, "You don't know the emotional trauma I just had to go through."

"Seriously, Dustin," Max huffs, crossing her arms, "Who brushed you

off?"

"Stacy," Dustin mumbles, suddenly feeling sheepish.

"Oh," Max shrugs, "That's fine."

"That's *fine*?!" Dustin exclaims.

"Stacy's a jerk!" Lucas shrugs, "You can do way better!"

"She's not a jerk!" Dustin defends, "I think she was just in a bad mood today."

"More like every day," Mike mutters.

"Forget Stacy!" Max huffs, waving the issue aside, "We have bigger things to talk about."

"Like what?" Will asks curiously.

Max opens her mouth to reply but is cut off by the ringing of the school bell. The chaotic clamor of the nearby students only increases in frenzy as everyone begins rushing to either their lockers or to classrooms.

Max rolls her eyes, feeling a little miffed to have been interrupted. "Meet me at The Spot during lunch," she instructs, raising her voice to be heard over all the noise.

"On a scale of 1 to 10, how serious is this?" Dustin questions.

"11," Max insists.

"11?" Mike echoes, starting to feel a little worried.

Max nods seriously. "It's about our *band*."

They'd never planned on forming a band, it was something that just kind of...happened.

It was a summer night, a summer *movie* night, to be exact, and they were all seated on the floor, huddled around the TV in the Wheeler's

basement. It was the summer before their freshman year, and an unusually hot one at that. Even though they were tucked away inside the air-conditioned cocoon that was Mike's basement, the telltale signs of a sweltering summer day spent in the outdoors lingered — their hair was mussed with flyaways, there were dried beads of sweat on their foreheads, and the sharp scent of bug spray permeated the air.

They were watching a documentary on the Beatles, since they couldn't agree on a movie to watch and the documentary was the only semi-interesting thing they could find on TV.

They were watching a clip from one of the band's concerts when Mike spoke up, voice casually indifferent.

"We could do that you know," he shrugged, "If we really wanted to."

Lucas turned to eye him skeptically. "Be the Beatles?"

"I think he was out in the sun too long today," Dustin snorted, fanning himself with his hat, "He's got heat stroke."

"I'm not talking about being the Beatles!" Mike replied, "But just like...having a band. I don't know, my parents just got me a guitar for last Christmas, and I've been learning to play it, and...yeah. I dunno, it was just an idea."

Silence settled over the group as they refocused their attention towards the documentary. The crowd of concert-goers on the TV screen was going wild, and their static-y roar echoed throughout the room.

"I know how to play bass," Max offered idly, unexpectedly, "After Billy moved out, I kind of borrowed his old one...and never gave it back."

"Steve has an old drum set that I could probably use," Dustin added, "He says he's using it as a clothing rack, so I'm pretty sure that means he doesn't need it."

"I used to take piano lessons when I was little," Will mentioned, "It was a while ago, but I think I could probably remember most of it."

"Being in a band could be fun," Lucas admitted.

"Alright, then," Mike nodded, "Let's do it."

And it was as simple as that.

The Spot, as Max had called it, is the nickname that they've given to the Hawkins High auditorium. It's their band's in-school hangout spot — the place where they go to get away from all the noise and commotion that comes with eating in the cafeteria. It's secluded and only ever gets disturbed when the fall musical takes place — then the area is overrun with anxious theatre geeks and bulky cardboard set pieces.

When lunchtime rolls around, they gather their lunches, head to the auditorium, and sit in a circle on the floor of the stage. As they begin to dig into their lunches, the sea of red velvet auditorium chairs stares back at them. On days past, they've joked that someday their band will be selling out to packed auditoriums even bigger than this one. But today, when Max poses her proposition, there's no packed crowds, thunderous applause, or even any semblance of approval.

Instead, the guys all just look kind of confused.

"We need a *what*?" Dustin frowns, still holding his baloney sandwich as he pauses mid-bite.

"We need a lead singer!" Max repeats, "You know, for our band!"

"But why?" Lucas frowns, "Our band is fine just the way it is."

"Sure, we're *fine*," Max shrugs, "But we could be *awesome*. Do you think the Beatles would have become famous if they just played instrumentals for their entire career?"

"You could sing for us then," Mike points out, "We don't need to get anyone new."

At this, Max flushes even redder than her hair. "There's no way I'm singing!" she declares, shaking her head adamantly.

"Why not?" Lucas counters, voice gentle and genuine, "You have a great voice!"

Max almost looks touched for a moment, but then that moment is shattered by the harsh sound of Dustin bursting into laughter.

Dustin nearly chokes on his baloney from laughing so hard. "You *sing* for Lucas?!" He teases.

"I don't sing *for* him!" Max snaps, glaring at Dustin, "But yeah, I guess I've sung in *front* of him before, like, while we were driving, maybe."

"Can you sing for me, Max?" Dustin pleads mockingly, "Pretty please?"

"Can you shut up for me, Dustin?" Max replies, mimicking his tone with an almost terrifying level of accuracy, "Pretty please?"

"So," Will interrupts, returning the focus to what Max had originally wanted to talk about, "You think that we should have someone sing the lyrics to the songs we play?"

Max nods as she takes a bite of her own lunch, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. "It'd make us sound more legit," she says as she chews.

Mike muses over the idea as everyone else continues to eat. Even though they call themselves a band, they have yet to really write their own songs. All of the songs they play are just covers of their favorite rock songs, which, while fun, definitely wasn't 'legit.' Maybe having someone to provide vocals would not only help give them some credibility, but would make them sound better too.

"I mean, it can't hurt to try," Mike shrugs, moving his gaze to look over everyone else in the group, "If it'll make our band better, I say we go for it."

"But the band is *our* thing," Dustin pouts.

"Yeah!" Lucas nods, "We made it because we're friends; we shouldn't just let a stranger into it!"

"So, we'll make it be a closed audition," Max replies easily, "Fellow Hawkins High students only. Then we'll at least recognize them."

"That's a great idea!" Will says eagerly, "I could design some fliers to advertise the audition!"

"We could have it right here!" Mike nods, motioning to the stage area around them, "After school!"

"That'd be sweet!" Max beams, "We'd look so professional!"

"Wait, slow down!" Lucas interrupts, holding up his hands, "Are we actually doing this?"

"I think we should give it a shot," Mike contends, feeling increasingly enthusiastic about the prospect. Despite how frivolous the band may seem to some (like Mr. Wheeler, for example), to Mike, it's something he's immensely proud of. He and his friends have spent hours in Mike's garage, learning chords, practicing songs, and giving it their all. If adding a new member to their group will really help them improve even further, then to Mike the decision's a no-brainer.

"And if we don't like whoever auditions, then we don't have to choose any of them," Max adds. She turns to look at Lucas hopefully, smiling in him in *that way* that she always does when she's got a plan.

Lucas loves his girlfriend, he really does, but sometimes he can't help but wish that she wasn't always so...

...Adventurous.

Max's zest for adventure was one of the reasons Lucas started crushing on her in the first place, but it was also the reason that he got grounded (when Max dared him to sneak over to her house after midnight), permanently traumatized (when Max dared him to go into a haunted house attraction with her on Halloween — they were 12, the guy who jumped out of the shadows with a chainsaw was in high school), a sprained wrist (when Max dared him to climb a tree as high as he could), and attacked by bees (see: tree-climbing incident).

Of course, Max was always there to support him, comfort him, and apologize (because seriously, how was she supposed to know that

there was an active hornets' nest at the top of the tree?). Lucas never held it over her, because he knew she wasn't trying to be malicious — she just liked trying new things. The problem was that sometimes trying new things could get them (him) into trouble.

So now, when Max makes her suggestion, Lucas immediately starts thinking of all the ways that things could go wrong.

"I don't know," he mutters, "I like our band how it is now."

"I do too," Dustin nods, "We don't need any weirdos in our band."

"Then you better leave," Max jabs, unable to help herself.

Dustin gives her a scowl before peeling the bread off his sandwich and dangling the slimy, salmon-colored slice of baloney in the air. The processed lunch meat makes a disgustingly slick smacking sound as Dustin waves it threateningly.

"If you throw that shit at me," Max warns, "I'm gonna drop-kick your —"

"No one is going to throw anything at anyone!" Mike exclaims exasperatedly. He throws Dustin a chastising frown, and Dustin reluctantly returns the baloney slice back to his sandwich.

"You know, maybe it wouldn't hurt to get someone more *normal* in the band," Lucas says, only half-joking, "You guys are borderline insane."

"So you agree?" Max asks excitedly, locking eyes with Lucas, "We should hold auditions?"

Lucas hesitates and glances at the rest of the guys. Mike and Will are smiling encouragingly. Dustin is shaking his head and mouthing *don't do it*.

"I guess...we can try," Lucas gives in.

"No!" Dustin mopes, falling back on the stage dramatically.

"Thank you!" Max smiles, even though they both kind of know that

Max probably would have done it anyway, regardless of what Lucas said. After all, with Mike and Will on her side, he's outnumbered.

Hopefully, this isn't one of Max's ideas that'll leave him with some sort of injury, emotional trauma, or other malady of some sort.

Fingers crossed.

Will spends all of Monday evening designing a flyer to advertise their auditions. The band agrees that Thursday is the best time to host them, since the auditorium is always empty on those afternoons and Mike doesn't have work.

On Tuesday, they hang the flyers up all around school.

On Thursday, when the final bell rings and the rest of the students are headed to the parking lot, the band takes their seats in the first row of red velvet auditorium chairs. Dustin sits on the far-most left of the group, followed by Mike, Lucas, Max, and Will respectively.

Mike has his guitar with him, and as he sets it on the ground and leans it up against his seat, Lucas eyes him critically.

"I didn't know we were supposed to bring our guitars," Lucas mutters.

"I dunno," Mike shrugs, "I just thought it'd be good to have, like just in case anyone needs some accompaniment."

Lucas swallows back the bitter feeling irking at him (the Mike's-still-trying-to-assert-himself-as-the-lead-guitarist-of-our-band-even-though-Lucas-was-also-a-guitarist feeling) and turns his attention to Max, who's also brought a prop.

"What's the clipboard for?" Lucas asks, giving Max a small nudge.

"It makes things look more official," Max shrugs, tapping her pen against the yellow legal pad she has clipped to the board.

Will is bouncing in his seat excitedly. "This is going to be so much fun!" He smiles, "We're going to be like real talent scouts!"

"How long do you think it'll take for people to start showing up?" Mike asks.

"We put 3:00 on the fliers," Will replies.

Mike glances at his watch and frowns. "Well, it's 3:00 now..."

"Give people time," Max says hastily, "They probably have to go back to their lockers and pack up their stuff or whatever."

And so they wait. They decide to give people 5 minutes to show up...

And then 10 minutes...

15 minutes...

20...

After 25 minutes pass and the five of them are still the only ones sitting in the auditorium, they all start to feel a little disheartened. Mike is drumming his leg impatiently, Max is agitatedly tapping her pen against her clipboard, Will is chewing on his bottom lip, and Dustin and Lucas are just waiting to get out of here.

"Hey, guys?" Dustin finally says, voice echoing throughout the silent, empty auditorium, "So, I like, don't think anyone's going to show up."

"Bummer," Lucas says dryly, "I'll guess we'll have to keep our band the way it is."

"This is stupid!" Max huffs, rising to her feet and throwing her hands into the air, clipboard still in her grasp, "People should be begging to join us! They're lucky we're even considering letting anyone in!"

"Maybe people didn't see the fliers," Will theorizes, still looking worried.

"How could they not see them?" Mike grumbles, "We put them all over school!"

"I think this is a sign," Dustin shrugs, "We shouldn't try to change our band!"

"So, let's just get out of here!" Lucas sighs, rising to his feet as well, "I'm getting tired anyways, and—"

"Hello?" A new voice calls out from behind, cutting Lucas off.

The voice, unrecognizable and unexpected, causes them to all freeze in place. They exchange startled glances before turning in their seats, gazes moving to where the sound had come from.

Standing in the aisle, next to their row of seats is a girl. She looks to be about their age, though as none of the band members recognize her, they can't be completely sure. She has wavy brown hair that comes to a curled stop just past her shoulders. Her smile is small, yet soft, and she has warm brown eyes that scan their group over with an expectant, hopeful glint to them. She's wearing a grey sweater, worn overalls, and scuffed-up sneakers.

"Hi?" she says again, offering a small wave.

No one is quite sure how to respond, so they just blink back at her rather unhelpfully.

"I'm here for the band audition?" The girl continues shyly.

"You are?" The band echoes in shock. For most of them, the shock is due to the fact that they can't believe someone actually showed up.

And then there's Mike, who's shocked for an entirely different reason.

Mike, whose jaw is slightly hanging open.

Mike, who, for some ridiculous reason, suddenly can't get the song *Magic* by Pilot out of his head.

Mike, who's wondering if he's just ascended to the afterlife.

Mike, who's certain that he's never seen a prettier girl in his entire life.

"Yes?" The girl hesitates, looking a little put-off by their shocked expressions, "I saw the flyer..."

"That's us!" Mike pipes up quickly, "We're the band! We're having the auditions! The auditions that you're here for! The auditions for the band!"

"Oh!" The girl smiles, looking more at ease, "Good."

"Great!" Mike beams.

"Where should I go?" She asks, glancing around the auditorium.

"You can just go up on stage," Mike replies excitedly, "Or like, wherever else you want."

"Okay," The girl nods, turning to look at the stage.

"Okay!" Mike exclaims, grinning like a total dweeb.

His friends throw Mike odd glances, but Mike doesn't meet their gaze. Instead, his eyes follow the girl as she walks down the aisle and goes to stand center-stage. One of the stage lights shines directly in her eyes and she squints, shakily stepping out of its beam.

Max and Lucas take their seats. The band, Mike included, composes themselves and turns in their seats so that they're facing the girl directly. As they all look her over, they can't help but feel a little bewildered. Hawkins isn't a big town — everyone pretty much knows everyone, especially within the confines of their high school.

So, why haven't they seen her before?

"What's your name?" Dustin asks, and Mike's certain that Dustin has never asked a more essential question in his entire life.

"Eleanor," the girl answers, "But I like El."

El. What a great name — the best name, actually. Mike's never heard anything like it, but then again, he's never *seen* anyone like her, either.

"Interesting," Max nods seriously. She ducks her head as if she's jotting down notes on her clipboard. In reality, she's just doodling a smiley face that's kind of turning into a caricature of Mike. She

decides to run with it and starts drawing in his insufferably messy mop of hair.

"Do you even go here?" Lucas asks, not intending for it to sound as blunt as it comes out.

"Lucas!" Mike hisses, throwing him a scowl.

"What!?" Lucas hisses back defensively, "For all we know, she could just be some weirdo that just walked in off the streets!"

"He has a point!" Dustin whispers.

"I guess he does," Max shrugs, adding freckles to her Mike drawing.

"I'm a Junior — I just moved here," El replies, thankfully not hearing what they're whispering. Either that, or she's choosing to ignore it.

"From where?" Mike asks eagerly.

"Chicago," El answers.

"Wait a minute," Will frowns. He thinks back to the conversation he'd had with his mom earlier in the week, in which she'd gone off on this excited tangent about how one of her old high school friends was moving back to Hawkins from Chicago. "...Is your last name Hopper?"

El nods.

"Hopper? Who's that?" Max asks, not looking up from her clipboard.

"Her dad — he's going to be the new chief of police," Will explains, "Since the old one just retired."

"I heard that the old one went like, crazy and tried to arrest a squirrel for murder!" Dustin pipes up.

Will stares at him blankly. "Who told you that?"

"Steve."

"I'm pretty sure he was messing with you," Max snorts, "Since you'll

believe anything."

"No, I won't!" Dustin insists defensively.

"Yes, you will," Max shrugs, "I mean, you can just ask Steve, he's literally right here."

"He *is*!?" Dustin exclaims in shock. He turns to glance over his shoulder, but then Max starts cackling, and that's when he knows that he's just proved Max's point.

"Did you seriously just fall for that?" Max exclaims, looking up from her doodle just so she can laugh at the annoyed, embarrassed look on Dustin's face.

"Whatever!" Dustin huffs, "Arresting a squirrel is still a way better way to lose your job than just getting too old."

"Guys!" Mike snaps, clapping his hands twice to silence them, "We're auditioning somebody!"

Their frivolous chatter comes to a stop as everyone turns to look at El again, who's still standing on stage, smiling a little awkwardly.

"Sorry about that," Mike apologizes to El, voice going from snappy and demanding to soft and gallant in a heartbeat.

"It's okay!" El replies. Her voice is light and wavering, as if she's trying to stop herself from laughing.

"So, El," Will says courteously, "What are you going to sing?"

"I..." El begins shyly, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, "I...I was thinking of doing *Blackbird*?"

"By the Beatles?" Lucas clarifies.

El nods.

Mike has to bite down on his lower lip to keep his jaw from dropping again. So, not only is El super pretty, but she also has amazing taste in music too. He has to be dreaming.

"Alright," Dustin sighs, eyeing her warily, "Did you bring the music for it?"

El's face, already looking pretty washed-out by the stage lights, pales even further at this. "I...I didn't know I had to bring music," she admits forlornly.

"That's okay!" Mike offers eagerly. He picks up his guitar, slips the strap over his shoulder, and positions his fingers over the strings. "I know how to play that song!"

"Really?" El brightens, eyes meeting his in a grateful smile

Mike's honestly surprised that he doesn't explode from how fast his heart starts to race. Thankfully, he doesn't explode (because that'd be like...embarrassing — plus, he'd technically die), he only momentarily loses the ability to speak. He nods in response, mouth feeling dry.

"Okay then," Lucas says, glancing at Mike reluctantly. A part of him wishes he'd brought along his guitar as well — not because he particularly cares about playing for El, but because now El's first impression of their band is going to be that *Mike's* the main guitarist.

"Just let me know when you're ready," Mike instructs El.

"Okay," El replies. She closes her eyes, takes a soft, steadying breath and, once she's ready, turns to look at Mike and gives him a nod.

Mike nods back before he starts to play the opening chords. His fingers move over the strings in a practiced motion. The song is an old favorite of his, he's had to have played it at least a hundred times. It's expected, familiar, and unsurprising—

— Much unlike El, everyone quickly realizes.

Though El's speaking voice had been so timid and uncertain, when she starts to sing, her voice is strong and sure. The lyrics roll off her lips with an authentic sweetness that hangs in the air like a spell, leaving every member of the band mesmerized.

Mike is shocked that he's able to keep playing since his mind has

turned into a transfixed, muddled mess at this point. His mind only grows even mushier when El meets his gaze as she sings. He holds her gaze as he keeps playing, smiling encouragingly as he strums the simple sentimental tune.

Though El only sings for about two minutes, it feels as if time has come to a standstill. When she finally finishes, voice carrying out the final mellifluous note, a stunned silence echoes throughout the auditorium.

Nobody says anything, which seems to worry El. The smile she'd been sporting falters as she looks at their hanging jaws and wide eyes. "So..." she murmurs, fingering the sleeve of her sweater, "That's it."

Another beat of silence. And then—

"You're hired!" Mike exclaims.

"Really?" El smiles at him.

"Really?!" Mike's friends exclaim indignantly, turning to gawk at him.

"Don't you think we should discuss this as a group first?" Lucas hisses.

"Yeah!" Dustin also hisses, "You can't just go and make decisions without consulting the rest of the band!"

"Kind of a dick move, Wheeler," Max adds.

"Are you guys kidding me?!" Mike exclaims, "She was amazing!"

"We know she was!" Will nods, "But I think we should all talk with each other first. It's only fair."

"Fine!" Mike huffs with an eye roll. He motions for everyone to move in, so they do, forming a makeshift sort of crescent-shaped huddle. "What do you guys wanna say?" He asks, keeping his voice low.

"I think she was awesome," Max shrugs, "I say we let her in."

Even though Dustin knows that the entire point of this audition was to add a new member to the band, now that the time has actually

come to indoctrinate a new person — a *stranger*, really — into their group, he can't help but feel a little protectively defensive. After all, they've all been friends since elementary school. Are they really just going to let in someone totally unfamiliar? That just seems so... weird. He's not quite sure how he feels about it.

"Are we sure though?" Lucas frowns, voicing Dustin's inner concerns, "Like, we barely know her. Won't it be weird?"

"You guys agreed to audition a new member!" Mike reminds them.

"I didn't think it be some new kid!" Lucas defends, "I thought it'd be someone we already knew!"

"Exactly!" Dustin nods.

"Well, we can get to know her then," Mike shrugs, "She seems nice."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's why you want her in the band, Mike," Max replies dryly.

"W-what are you talking about?" Mike stammers, desperately hoping that his cheeks aren't as flushing pink as he feels they are.

Max holds up her finished drawing of Mike — a lanky stick-figure with a smiley face, big hair, and hearts for eyes. *That's you*, she mouths, pointing at the drawing, then at El, and finally at Mike.

"Oh my god!" Dustin frowns at the drawing, his nose crinkling in disdain. He turns to give Mike an accusing look. "You don't actually like her, do you?"

Even though the words they're exchanging are all hushed and hissed, Mike's paranoid that El's going to hear somehow. "What?!" He exclaims, furrowing his brow with what he hopes comes across as annoyance, "No! Ew! Gross! I just think she's a good singer!"

"She is!" Will nods.

"So, we let her join," Max shrugs, setting down her clipboard, "Do you know how awesome it'd be to have another girl around here?"

"I dunno," Lucas sighs, "What if she turns out to be crazy and messes things up?"

"How would she mess things up?" Will asks patiently.

"Yoko Ono!" Dustin answers.

"Yoko Ono?" Max repeats, giving him a skeptical look.

"Yoko Ono!" Dustin confirms, "She started dating John Lennon, and then she got all up in the Beatles' shit, and messing things up, and then everything went to shit and the band broke up!"

"Do you actually think *one* girl was responsible for breaking up the Beatles?" Max asks challengingly.

"It's not just what I think!" Dustin hisses, "These are facts! This actually happened! We all saw the documentary!"

"Well, that's not going to happen to us," Lucas states firmly, "None of us are going to date her. I'm with Max, Will is...Will, and Mike—"

The band members all turn to look over at Mike, who's currently blushing bright red. "Please!" He bolsters, "There's no WAY I'm going to date her! I mean, I don't even know her! I'm not going to try to do anything just because she's like, super attractive!"

His friends give him confused, questioning looks, so he quickly adds, "Which she *isn't*."

Nailed it.

"Fine then," Dustin huffs, "She can join the band, as long as she doesn't split us up."

"She won't!" Mike insists.

"So, we all agree?" Will confirms, "She's in?"

Everyone exchanges glances before nodding in agreement. They break up their huddle and turns to face El again, who's looking pretty anxious.

"Well, El," Max begins ominously.

"Yes?" El asks hopefully.

Max allows a beat of silence to pass, just to make things a bit more dramatic, allowing the tension to build, and then—

"You're in!" She says, unable to stop herself from smiling.

"I am?" El says happily. When the band nods in response, she beams from ear-to-ear. "Thank you! I promise I'll do good!"

Max and Will smile approvingly.

Dustin and Lucas smile reluctantly.

Mike, once again, isn't sharing the sentiments of any of his friends. His smile is one of awkward self-realization. It's the smile of someone that's becoming increasingly aware of just how pretty El is, and how amazing her smile is, and how perfect her voice is.

It's the smile of someone who's realizing that he's totally screwed.

2. Where El Falls for Mike

In Hopper's words, El's always just 'kept to herself.'

In El's opinion, she's always just sucked at making friends.

It wasn't like she didn't *try* to get to know people — it was just hard. Growing up, she was always so shy, so reserved, so happy being on her own that she didn't realize something was a little off until it was too late. By the time she started wanting friends to hang out with, everyone in her school had already established their own tightly-knitted cliques and social circles. She was left behind as an afterthought, forever stuck in the 'none of the above' category.

Maybe that's why, when her dad suggested moving back to his hometown, El had been so excited. Everything about Chicago was starting to grate on her, from the snobby kids at school to the constant reminder that just a couple years ago, Diane (yes, *Diane*, because El's still refusing to think of that woman as her mother) had walked out on both El and Hopper, leaving them to fend for themselves in the cramped apartment they shared.

Moving to Hawkins felt like shaking an Etch-A-Sketch clean, and El was more than ready for a new, fresh slate —

— She just wasn't quite prepared for how *new* everything would be.

Hawkins was nothing like Chicago. In Chicago, she'd fallen asleep every night to the sounds of blaring car horns, wailing police sirens, and muffled chatter from neighboring apartments. In Hawkins, there were only the sounds of chirping crickets and distant dogs' barking to accent the night, leaving everything feeling eerily quiet in comparison.

In Chicago, she'd taken the city bus to school every day. There were always interesting things to see on a city bus, like a guy carrying a live pigeon in the front pocket of his trench coat or an old lady who claimed to be an oracle and wore so many necklaces that you could barely see her neck. In Hawkins, El had to take the regular yellow school bus. The seats were a plastic-y brown leather, all the kids

threw paper airplanes and shouted at each other, and the most interesting thing to look at was the collage of chewed gum wads left underneath the seats.

In Chicago, there were so many kids at El's school that she was easily able to slip under the radar and go unnoticed. In Hawkins, all eyes were on her the minute she stepped into the hallway on the first day of school. It felt like everyone was sizing her up, instantly identifying her as an outsider.

But that was a good thing, she reminded herself. She needed to be noticed, at least a little, if she was going to make friends here. The only problem was, she wasn't exactly sure *how* she was supposed to make friends. Was she supposed to just pick a random person to introduce herself to? That seemed too awkward and unnatural.

She wound up eating lunch alone on the first day of school, poutingly thinking about how this was something that both Chicago and Hawkins had in common. She just wished that there was an easier way to find people who were looking for a new friend like she was.

That easier way, as it would turn out, revealed itself to her the following day.

The flyer was taped to the locker right beside hers. The vibrant, artsy design easily captured her attention and she gently pulled it off the locker so she could look at it more closely.

Lead singer wanted! Band auditions to be held Thursday in the Auditorium, 3:00, all Hawkins High students welcome!

El read it over a few more times before folding the flyer into her pocket without much thought. But it was already too late — the idea had wormed its way into her head like a catchy pop song. Throughout the day, her mind continued to drift back to it, her fingers brushed against it in her pocket. On the bus ride home, she kept taking the flyer out to look at it.

El didn't really know anything about music. She'd never played an instrument or been in a band or anything, but she did know how to sing. She was pretty good at it too (at least, she was by her dad's

affirmations, though that wasn't saying much, since dads were *supposed* to say nice things like that). Perhaps joining a band would be the perfect way to make a few new friends and submerge herself into a group.

It was a crazy idea, really. Like, who joins a band just in the hopes of befriending the other members?

Apparently, El.

It's now Thursday after school and El's just finished her band audition. She didn't mess up a note once, and by the looks on the other kids' faces, they all seem pretty impressed. Nevertheless, despite how well El feels that her audition went, it's still a huge relief when the red-headed girl announces, "You're in!"

"I am?" El exclaims, unable to stop herself from smiling. The five students sitting in the auditorium seats nod, and El can hardly believe her luck. They'd liked her! They wanted her to be a part of their group! It's so exciting, she can barely contain herself.

"Thank you!" She replies gratefully, "I promise I'll do good!"

The band members smile back before getting up from their seats. El gets off the stage and they meet each other in the aisle.

"We should introduce ourselves," the smaller, quieter boy suggests.

"Right!" The guitarist exclaims, pushing past everyone so he can stand in front of El. He seems so excited that El can't help but giggle at his antics.

"I'm Mike!" he offers, holding out his hand.

El's giggles settle into a soft smile as she reaches out to shake his hand. "You play really good, Mike," she replies, glancing at the guitar slung over his shoulder.

Mike's face flushes pink as he drops her hand. "Thanks!" He smiles back, looking torn between bashfulness and pride.

El's gaze briefly flits over Mike's features as she takes in his pale skin,

wavy dark hair, soft lips, and smattering of freckles. She thinks back to the moment they'd just shared, when she was singing and Mike was playing. Their gazes had met, just like they were now, and for those few moments, she'd *felt* something. Like they were the only two people in the room.

Of course, they're not the only two people. Mike steps aside and the rest of the band members introduce themselves: Max, Lucas, Dustin, and Will.

"Band practice is every Tuesday after school," Will explains after introductions are exchanged.

"At my house!" Mike cuts in eagerly, "We play in my garage, it's pretty cool."

"It's a *garage*," Lucas says dryly.

"Garages can be cool," Mike shrugs.

"Yours isn't," Dustin teases with a snort.

El watches as they go back and forth, unable to stop herself from smiling. Their banter flows so naturally and playfully, she can't believe that they're even willing to let her in. Now she's just gotta figure out how to fit in with everyone else.

"*Anyway*," Max huffs with an eye roll. She digs into the pocket of her red hoodie and pulls out two items: a mixtape and a scrap of paper with an address scrawled on it. "Here's where we practice; here's all the songs we play," she explains as she passes both items to El.

"We need you to learn all of our songs," Lucas instructs.

El nods as she tentatively accepts the items from Max. She has to memorize their songs? *All* of them? By when? And how? El mostly listens to records, so she doesn't have a cassette player, other than the one in her dad's car.

"Is that ok?" Will asks gently.

El swallows back her inner questions with a nod. She doesn't want

their first impression of her to be that she's a whiny wimp. She'll just have to figure things out as she goes along.

"Great!" Mike smiles brightly, "So, I guess the next time we'll see you is Tuesday?"

"Yes," El nods again, "Tuesday."

As it turns out, that's kind of a lie. Well, okay: maybe it's not a *lie*, but it's definitely not true. El actually sees them a lot earlier than Tuesday. One of them, at least.

After school the next day, El skips the school bus and instead walks to Radio Shack. It takes her awhile to find it, but she heads to the downtown area of Hawkins and is able to locate it soon enough.

(Downtown, of course, is highly subjective. It's more like a longer, busier street with lots of businesses on each side, not an actual metropolis.)

She enters Radio Shack, which is surprisingly slow for a Friday afternoon. The store is quiet albeit for the classic rock playing over the radio and the chime of the bell that sounds when she enters.

"Hello?" El calls out, glancing around the empty store. Does anyone even work here? Hawkins is so small, El honestly wouldn't be surprised by any answer to that question.

She gets her answer moments later when a gangly kid carrying a teetering tower of boxes emerges from the backroom.

El recognizes his dark, mussed hair and lanky figure at once.

"Mike!" She calls out happily, elated to have found a familiar face.

Mike is halfway across the store, still carefully attempting to carry the inventory boxes to their proper aisle. He probably should have done this in two trips, but whatever — this way is faster and he's *totally* got it under control.

—Until he doesn't.

He glances up when he hears someone call his name. The last person he would expect to see standing in the store's entrance is El, and yet, there she is, looking adorable in a pink sweater and overalls and waving at him all excitedly.

Mike, stupidly, smilingly, raises a hand to wave back at her, and that's when his tower of boxes comes crashing to the ground.

El's eyes widen. "Oh no!" She gasps as she rushes over to him, "I'm sorry!"

"It's okay!" Mike assures her, "I was just...I mean...I shouldn't have been carrying so many."

El gives a sheepish smile as she wrings her fingers together nervously. "I shouldn't have surprised you like that."

"It's no big deal," Mike shrugs in response, though his face is still a little flushed. He's wearing what El assumes to be the usual Radio Shack uniform — a short-sleeved button-up shirt, a striped black and grey tie, and a plastic name tag.

Mike Wheeler, she reads as her gaze lands on his name tag.

El Wheeler, she thinks instinctively, for some completely insane reason. Oh god, what was wrong with her? *Why* did she think that? She literally just met him *yesterday*, and she doesn't even know anything about him. She doesn't even like him like that, at least, she's pretty sure she doesn't. Why did she have to be so *weird*?

Mike takes note of the uncomfortable look on El's face and he realizes that she probably came here because she needs to buy something, and he's like, totally ignored that.

"Anyway," he says as he straightens up. He adjusts his tie as he tries to look more professional than he actually is. "What can I help you find?"

El eyes him with a hesitant smile. "Shouldn't you pick those up?" She points out, motioning towards the boxes.

"Eh," Mike shrugs, "I'll do it later. I'm here 'till like, 9:00, so I got

time. You're more important."

El's eyes widen with surprise, and that's when Mike realizes he *totally* just sounded like he was flirting with her, or something.

"I mean, helping *customers* is more important," Mike adds hastily, "Since it's like, my job."

"Right!" El nods quickly, "Of course!"

An awkward silence settles over the pair as they both eye each other expectantly.

"So..." Mike begins slowly, "What can I help you find?"

El realizes that this entire time, he's probably been waiting for her to say something, and she's just been blinking back at him like a total wastoid.

She really does sucks at making friends.

"I need a Walkman!" El answers quickly, "To listen to your band's tape."

"*Our* band," Mike reminds her with a smile.

Despite how flustered El still feels, she can't help but smile back at that. "Our band," she echoes happily.

Mike knows he's not supposed to like El — and he doesn't — but that still doesn't mean that he can't be nice to her. Because that's all he's doing. He's just being *super nice* to his new friend that's totally not attractive in any way. Yup.

"So," Mike continues, clearing his throat a little, "What kind of Walkman do you want?"

El's brow crinkles in confusion. "What *kind*?"

"We have different models," Mike explains, "They're all gonna have different specs, battery life, adapters..."

When El only stares at him blankly, Mike realizes that she probably had no idea what he's talking about.

"C'mon," he smiles, motioning for her to follow him. "I'll show you."

"Thank you," El replies gratefully, following Mike as he guides her through the aisles. As he walks in front of her, El can't help but check out his figure. He's tall, a good 6 inches more so than her, and she has to crane her neck back to look at the top of his head. His hair is somehow even messier from the back — stray curls stick out in haphazard directions and El finds herself fighting back the urge to smooth them into place.

As they come to a stop in front of an aisle of portable cassette players, Mike places his hands on his hips and eyes them in an almost confrontational sort of manner.

"As you can see," he says, motioning one hand over the selection, "We got a lot of options."

"I see," El nods, moving to stand beside him. She eyes all the various models, still pouting in confusion. "I guess...I don't care what kind I get — I just need a regular one."

Mike gives her a small, offended gasp, and for a moment, El worries that she actually upset him, but when she turns to glance at him, she notices that he has a playful glint in his eyes and a slight smile curving his lips. "You don't *care*?" Mike questions, still feigning indignation.

El holds back a giggle and decides to play along. "I don't," she shrugs indifferently.

Mike makes a wounded grunting sort of sound as he places his hand over his heart. "You're killing me, El," he wheezes.

El isn't able to stop herself from giggling at that, and the sound leaves Mike feeling a little starry-eyed. The sound of her laugh is just as pretty as the sound of her singing, and Mike knows that he would be completely happy to listen to both for the rest of his days.

Was that too mushy? Probably. Either way, he's now determined to

keep her laughing.

"Walkmans — Walkmen, if you will — are like, amazing," Mike continues.

"Walkmen!?" El giggles harder. It's so stupid — *Mike's* so stupid, because that joke isn't even really that funny, like, at all, and yet, El finds herself unable to stop the giddy feeling bubbling up within her. She feels stupid and happy. Stupidly happy.

"Walkmen," Mike nods seriously, "I mean, there's just so many different kinds, you gotta take this decision process seriously." He steps forward and picks up a couple examples to show her, holding them up as he continues to speak, "Like, we got your basic model, simple, classic, auto-stop capabilities, kind of boring."

"I don't want boring," El smiles, shaking her head in feigned disdain.

"*Exactly*," Mike nods, "Now we're on the same page. So, then we got fancier models — these ones can play tapes, *and* they have AM/FM radios, auto-reverse capabilities, the whole nine yards. We also got some ones that come in colors, like the WM-20. It doesn't come with a radio, but it's pink, so you could like, match your sweater."

El snorts as she eyes the metallic-pink player and glances down at her sweater. "That's true!"

"So," Mike concludes gravely, putting the players back on the shelf, "All I'm saying is, you might wanna take some time to seriously think about this. I mean, this is probably the biggest decision you'll ever make."

"You're right," El nods, crossing her arms as she mirrors his serious demeanor.

A beat of silence passes as El examines the different models. Mike watches her, gaze soft yet speculative, giving her a few minutes to decide before asking, "So, what's it gonna be?"

He nonchalantly runs a hand through his hair as he smiles at her, and something about that simple, completely insignificant action just *does something* to her.

Mainly, it makes her suddenly aware of just how many freckles he has, just how adorable his little smirk is, and just how dorky he looks in his uniform. She finds herself suddenly unable to hold his gaze and quickly diverts her attention back to the Walkmans (*Walkmen*).

"Uh...this one," she mumbles, grabbing the pink one as she blushes profusely.

"Interesting choice," Mike remarks.

El, still blushing like crazy, only shrugs in response. Great, so now she's forgetting how to talk.

"Well, if that's it, I'll just check you out," Mike says, wincing as the words leave his mouth. *Check her out?* "I mean, I'll cash you out," he amends.

El holds her Walkman tightly as she gives Mike an anxious smile. "Thank you."

She's gone from lighthearted and playful to quiet and anxious again, and Mike starts to worry that he might have done something wrong. Maybe his joking around had been too much for her? He needed to try a more casual approach.

"So," Mike begins nonchalantly, turning his back to El as he guides her down the aisles and towards the cash registers, "Do you like everything so far?"

El's certain that her heart literally stops at that. "W-what?"

"You moved here from Chicago, right?" Mike clarifies.

Oh. He was asking if she liked *Hawkins* so far. Not him. Thank god. There's no way she's willing to tell him about the butterflies fluttering in her chest, let alone how much she likes him so far.

"Right," El nods, trying to calm her nerves, which are suddenly feeling insanely jumpy, "I haven't seen a lot of Hawkins; it's only been two weeks, so I'm—"

And that's when she trips.

The next seconds pass by in a flustered, high-speed blur. She's too distracted by Mike, too lost in thought, too focused on not blushing that she doesn't see the boxes that Mike left scattered on the floor. El trips over one of the boxes and makes an embarrassing yelp. Mike turns around just in time to see her reel forward. El, completely out of balance, tumbles towards him, sending them both falling to the floor. Mike lands back-first on the tile floor, sending boxes flying in all sorts of directions. El, breathless, lands on top of him, causing her to gasp and Mike to grunt at the impact.

Mike blinks up at her, eyebrows raised, mouth slightly ajar.

"I'm so sorry!" El gasps again, utterly humiliated. "I'm so clumsy and stupid and—"

Yoko Ono, Yoko Ono, Mike repeats as he tries (and fails) to look at literally anything other than the girl lying on top of him. He promised his friends that he didn't — wouldn't — like her. Liking her could lead to dating her and dating her would ruin things...somehow...he's not exactly sure how, though...

"You're fine," Mike replies, voice a little hoarse.

El's cheeks flush a delicate shade of blush as she gives him a bashful smile. Her lashes flutter as she glances down shyly and bites down on her lower lip. Up this close to her, Mike can smell her rose-scented perfume. His gaze falls to the lip she's tucking into her mouth, and he feels as if he can already taste the cherry chapstick that leaves her lips looking pink and soft.

He can practically hear Dustin's voice in his head, yammering on about Yoko Ono and everything going to shit, but—

Screw it.

His friends are going to be so pissed if they find out he couldn't keep his word for literally more than 24 hours, but whatever. El is just so *pretty* and *nice* and her laugh is *incredible* and there's no way in hell that Mike's going to ignore all of that.

"Well...at least the Walkman's safe," Mike jokes, motioning towards

the item still secure in El's grasp.

El turns to glance at it, as if she'd forgotten it was even there. Then she's snorting and laughing again, and even though Mike's sprawled out on the ground he could almost swear he's floating.

"That's the biggest priority," El giggles, turning to grin at Mike.

"Obviously," Mike grins back.

As El looks down at Mike, the butterflies in her chest start to feel more like pterodactyls.

She shouldn't like him. After all, she just moved here, and he's one of her first real friends ever. You're not supposed to like your friends, at least, El's pretty sure you're not. But maybe it'd be okay if it was Mike...there were always exceptions to everything, right?

Before El can dwell on this further, they're interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat. El and Mike, startled, glance up to see a short, older man wearing a Radio Shack uniform looking down at them, a confused smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Shit.

Mike and El squirm out of each other's way as they scramble to their feet, both burning with embarrassment.

"It's not what it looks like!" Mike exclaims breathlessly, adjusting his tie.

"What does it look like?" The man asks, raising an eyebrow.

As El tries to collect herself, she glances at the name tag the man's wearing: *Bob Newby, manager*.

Aka, Mike's boss.

El's eyes widen as guilt washes over her. Because of her clumsiness, Mike's probably going to get in trouble at work now. Gee, what a *fantastic* friend she was.

"It looks like we were...*you know*," Mike answers, looking flustered, "but—"

"—We weren't!" El cuts in helpfully, "I slipped and Mike caught me."

"It was my fault!" Mike adds, "I left these boxes on the floor..."

El waits for Mike's boss to get mad, maybe even snap at him, but that doesn't happen. Instead, Bob only gives him a chastising sort of smile and shakes his head.

"Well, this is why we clean up stuff when we drop it," he says lightly, "So we're not tripping over each other like a bunch of blind mice."

"I'm so sorry!" Mike laments, "I forgot, but I promise it won't happen again!"

"It's alright to get distracted," Bob says with a knowing smile, "But I still need you to keep things orderly around here."

El glances at Mike just in time to watch his face go from pink to crimson. "I-I wasn't distracted!" Mike insists, not making eye contact with El.

"Right," Bob says, still giving Mike that knowing smile.

Mike likes his boss. Bob's always been nothing but nice to him, he treated Mike like family, even, but right now, Bob is making this entire situation so much more awkward than it needs to be.

"Well, I'm going to just...help her pay...for her thing," Mike replies weakly.

"Alright — while you do that, I'm going to log the new inventory," Bob explains, holding up a clipboard, "Did you see the stereos we got in? They're pretty nifty!"

"I bet!" Mike nods, smiling awkwardly.

Bob gives them one last wave before walking over to the stereo aisle. Mike, head ducked low, hurriedly leads El over to the cash register.

"Sorry about that," he mumbles as he starts to ring El up.

"Sorry?" El echoes, confused.

"For being a wastoid?" Mike offers, glancing up at her.

"You're not a wastoid," El assures him, giving him a soft look.

"No, I am," Mike replies, reaching out to take the Walkman from her so he can scan it, "You just don't know me well enough yet."

"Then I should get to know you better," El offers offhandedly. She almost wants to wince, because *holy shit, did she really just say that? To his face?* But as the words leave her lips, she realizes she doesn't regret any aspect of them. She really does want to get to know Mike better — she wants to get to know everyone in the band better, really. Plus, once she says it, Mike gets so flustered that he nearly drops the Walkman, and it's one of the most unintentionally cutest things El's ever seen.

"Y-you should!" Mike finally manages to stammer in reply, hurriedly placing the cassette player inside a plastic shopping bag. He doesn't know if El meant that in a flirty way, or anything, but from how hard his face is burning, she might as well have.

El pays for her Walkman, Mike hands her the bag, and then she's walking away from him, leaving him in a starry-eyed, rose-scented trance.

"I'll see you Tuesday?" El asks over her shoulder as she heads towards the door.

"Tuesday," Mike replies dazedly, unable to stop the dopey grin that spreads across his face.

El smiles back, grabs the door handle, and before exiting, stops to look back at him one last time. "And, Mike?"

Mike pauses, looking back at her hopefully. "Yeah?"

"I *really* like Hawkins so far," she says, giving him a pointed look.

And now Mike's got *Magic* stuck in his head again.

It's Tuesday afternoon, around 3:30, and El's late for band practice.

The rest of the band is lounging around Mike's garage as they wait for her to arrive. The door is wide open, giving them a wide view of the driveway and the small grassy field that lies beyond it. Though they're in the midst of September, the air that wafts into the garage still radiates with the remnants of summer warmth.

Mike's parents had been generous enough to let them use the entire garage for their band. The space is decorated with posters of their favorite bands, mismatched furniture they managed to find at thrift stores, a few strands of Christmas lights, their instruments, and a new addition: a mic stand.

As they wait, Will is sitting at his keyboard, idly practicing a couple chords. Mike is seated on one of the mismatched couches, drumming his foot anxiously. Dustin is seated behind his drum set, feeling so bored that he's almost ready to fall asleep. A few minutes prior, Max complained that her hair was making her neck feel too hot, so both she and Lucas are seated on the ground as he braids it for her ("You know how to braid hair?!" Dustin had asked teasingly, to which Lucas pointed out that his mom made him do Erica's hair all the time, so Dustin really needed to just 'calm his shit').

Time ticks by, accented only by the distant hum of cicadas, the faint notes of Will's keyboard, and the muttered swears of Lucas' fumbled attempts at a French braid.

5 more minutes pass, and then Dustin once again finds himself drawing attention to the obvious. "So, is she even going to show up?" He finally grumbles, "Or is being late to stuff just like, her thing?"

"Give her time!" Mike frowns, glancing over at Dustin, "She doesn't know her way around town yet!"

"Hawkins isn't that big," Dustin mumbles, "It shouldn't be that hard."

"Give her a break," Will instructs sympathetically, "You got lost trying

to find the Chemistry room, Dustin."

"That was like, only twice!" Dustin defends, "When I was a freshman!"

"The first time was when you were a freshman, the second time was when you were a sophomore," Will points out.

"How!?" Max snorts. She can't turn her head, on account of Lucas braiding her hair, so she settles for throwing Dustin a judgmental look out of the corner of her eye.

Dustin, unable to think of a valid excuse, simply makes an annoyed whine in response.

Max mimics his whine, and of course, that moment of them making absurd whining sounds at each other is the same moment that El finally arrives.

"El!" Max exclaims in surprise (and a bit of embarrassment, because now El's totally gonna think that they're all a bunch of spazzes), "You're here!"

"Hi!" El smiles, stepping into the garage entryway and waving at everyone.

"Hey!" Mike beams, waving back as he straightens up on the couch.

"What took you so long?" Lucas adds dryly, finishing off Max's braid with a hair-tie.

"I accidentally went onto Piney Wood Drive," El explains, rubbing her arm as she smiles apologetically, "Instead of Piney Wood Lane."

"That's fine," Mike rebuffs, waving her apology aside, "I make that mistake like, all the time."

"You make the mistake of getting lost to your own house all of the time?" Lucas inquires flatly, rising to his feet.

"Way to pull a Dustin," Max snorts, following Lucas' lead.

Mike and Dustin both make indignant exclamations at the same time,

earning a few laughs from the rest of the group.

"Anyway," Will continues once the laughs settle down, "We're glad you're here, El."

"Thank you," El replies gratefully.

As Mike looks her over, he notices that her Converse sneakers are sporting fresh dirt and grass stains. "Did you...walk here?" He asks concernedly.

El follows his gaze down to her feet. "Uh, yeah," she mumbles, "I don't have a car, so..."

"You shouldn't have to walk so far!" Will frowns, "You should have told us you didn't have a car."

"It wasn't that bad," El hesitates, "I used to walk everywhere in Chicago."

"Well, if you ever want a ride anywhere, you can let me know," Max offers, "I'm the wheels for this band."

Max points to something outside of the garage, and El turns her head to spot the dingy, windowless white van parked in the driveway.

"*That's* your — our — van?" El asks doubtfully.

"Yeah, I know it's pretty sketchy-looking," Max admits. "But that's what makes it kind of awesome, too."

"You could add our logo to the side," El offers tentatively, "Maybe that would make it look less..."

"Creepy?" Lucas offers dryly.

"Yes," El smiles sheepishly.

"We could..." Max begins hesitantly, "But..."

El eyes her curiously. "But?"

The other band members exchange reluctant glances, each daring

someone else to finish the sentence.

"We don't have a band name!" Mike finally admits, wincing slightly.

El blinks at them, waiting for them to all laugh, because they have to be joking, right? What kind of band doesn't even have a name. But then a few seconds pass, no one laughs, and El painstakingly realizes that they're being 100% serious.

"We...don't have a name?" El asks slowly.

"Not really," Will admits.

"Then what do people call you?" El exclaims incredulously.

"No one really calls us anything," Max shrugs, "People don't really know about us."

"What about when you play shows?"

"We've never played a show," Lucas grumbles.

"Never!?"

"We tried to play at the spring formal last year!" Mike pipes up, "But they got a DJ instead."

El stares at them blankly, completely at a loss for words.

"Hey!" Dustin snaps defensively, "Just because we don't have a name, and nobody knows about us, and we don't write our own songs, and we've never had a gig doesn't mean we're not a real band!"

"Right!" El nods quickly, though she still looks pretty baffled, "Of course."

"And, if you're going to be in this band, you gotta know our rules," Dustin continues, eyeing El seriously.

"Rules?" El repeats, frowning.

"The stupid rules," Max sighs as she tilts her head back to the ceiling and rolls her eyes.

"They're not stupid!" Dustin exclaims, "We established them when we first created our band!"

"He's right," Lucas nods, "El has to know them."

"What are they?" El asks anxiously.

"Number one," Lucas begins, counting off the first rule on his finger, "We don't lie to each other and we don't keep secrets from each other."

"Two," Dustin chimes in, "If you draw first blood, you gotta apologize first."

"First blood?!" El pales in alarm.

"It's one of their geek sayings," Max explains, "Basically, don't start shit unless you're willing to apologize."

"Oh," El relaxes.

"Three," Dustin continues, "You gotta know how to play an instrument, obviously."

At the third rule, El hesitates. She makes an uncomfortable sort of stammering sound as she looks away, not really making eye contact with anyone.

"Is everything okay, El?" Mike asks worriedly, brow furrowing as he looks her over.

"I don't..." El begins feebly, "...I don't know how."

"How to what?" Will questions.

"Play an instrument," El mumbles.

Now everyone but El are the ones left in stunned silence. Awkward glances are exchanged, and El feels her heart sink low in her chest.

"Why did you join a band if you can't even play an instrument!?" Lucas eventually scoffs, crossing his arms as he eyes El skeptically.

El pauses, looking a little hurt. "You said you needed a singer. I know how to sing, so..."

"Exactly!" Mike snaps, frowning at Lucas, "She's our lead *singer*! Why does it even matter whether or not she can play an instrument?!"

"It's band rules!" Dustin snaps back.

"The rules don't even matter!"

"Yes, they do!"

"How is she going to read our sheet music?" Lucas points out, "Or know anything that we're talking about?"

"She can learn!" Mike insists.

"How?" Lucas, Dustin, and El ask at the same time.

Mike, feeling unexpectedly put on the spot, reddens. "...I can teach her," he stammers, turning to look at El, "I can teach you how to play the guitar, if you want."

"Really?" El asks, drawing in an excited breath.

"Sure!" Mike smiles shyly, "It's pretty easy, and then you'd know how to read sheet music, and how to coordinate with the rest of us better."

"That's a really good idea!" Will nods, "The more you know about music theory, the better."

"But we can't stop rehearsals just so you can teach her stuff," Lucas points out, "The rest of us still have to practice too."

"So, I won't do it during band practice, then," Mike shrugs, "El and I can practice on a different day."

"When?" El inquires.

"Well," Mike frowns, racking his brain as he thinks through his schedule, "I work Monday, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and we have band practice every Tuesday, so...would Thursdays work?"

"Thursdays would work!" El nods, looking increasingly excited.

"Awesome," Max shrugs, "So it's settled then."

"Yeah," Mike nods, and then it really hits him. He's just arranged weekly one-on-one, totally private guitar lessons with El, the girl that he has a crush on even though he's totally not supposed to.

This can't end well, he begrudgingly thinks, but then he glances over at El again, and she's giving him the cutest little smile, and he realizes that this is actually the best thing to ever happen to him.

"Great," Dustin mumbles. He knows it's probably terrible of him, but a part of Dustin almost feels disappointed. He's still not thrilled about El just walking right into their friendship like this, and he can't help but think about how much easier it would be if a simple rule fracture was enough to send her off and get things back to normal.

"Can we actually get practice started now?" Max asks, walking over to pick up her bass. After sitting around for so long, she can feel herself starting to get fidgety. She doesn't like being in one place doing one thing for very long, it drives her crazy.

"I'm ready," Will nods, cracking his knuckles.

"Did you listen to our songs?" Lucas asks, grabbing his guitar as he watches El carefully.

El nods. "All weekend." She turns to throw Mike a conspiratorial grin, and Lucas can't help but feel like he's left out of some kind of inside joke between them.

"Good," Mike grins back, rising to his feet and grabbing his guitar, "Why don't we start with something easy?"

"Like what?" El asks, walking over to the mic.

"How's *I Melt With You* sound?" Mike suggests.

"Probably bad, since we're going to be playing it," Max jokes wryly.

"But that's one of the songs we're actually really good at," Will is

quick to defend.

"Good point," Max shrugs, flipping her braid over her shoulder, "I guess we don't suck all the time."

There are a couple of sonorous, off-kilter minutes comprised of various musical notes as the band tunes up their instruments and El warms up her voice. Then, once Dustin gives his drumsticks a few introductory taps, the band launches into the song, sounding way better than El admittedly expected, all things considered.

El begins to sing, and her voice, still as melodious as it'd been at her audition, meshes with their music as easily as if she'd been singing with them for years.

Their music reverberates through the amps and throughout the garage, filling their ears with a new warmth. Though both Lucas and Dustin are reluctant to admit it, deep down they both realize that the song does sound a lot better when they have someone to sing the words.

They're still not planning on admitting that anytime soon though.

As the song winds down to the bridge, El's soft humming buzzes throughout the air, making the entire room feel a little hazy.

"I'll stop the world and melt with you," El sings, glancing over her shoulder, and for a fleeting, purposeful moment, Dustin could almost swear that her shy gaze lingers on Mike.

Dustin frowns, but keeps playing, willing himself to believe that he's just imagining things.

Mike smiling, has to force himself to do the same.

3. Where El Learns to Play the Guitar

While most schools have Mystery-Meat Mondays, Hawkins High has the only thing that's probably worse: Mystery Meat *Wednesdays*.

Basically, every week the cafeteria lady takes all the meat that isn't finished on Monday, freezes it during Tator Tots Tuesday (the best day), and finally defrosts it again on Wednesday.

Having the congealed, sad excuse for a lunch once a week already sucks. Having it twice is just cruel and unusual punishment.

As Will stands in the cafeteria line and watches the lunch lady spoon a lukewarm slop of two-day-old meat onto his tray, he feels his stomach lurch. The sloppy smack it makes when it hits his plate is somehow even worse than the food looks, which Will honestly didn't think was possible.

Before Jonathan left to study at Indiana University, he'd always made jokes about how high school was basically a prison. As Will grabs a box of apple juice and exits the lunch line, he realizes that Jonathan was definitely wrong about that, at least in one respect: prison food would be far better than this.

Will's so busy examining his lunch that he nearly walks right into a trio of girls. He's trying to make his way out of the cafeteria and to the auditorium, but they're in his way, too distracted in aimless chatter to notice him approaching them.

As their paths cross, Will comes close to stepping on their feet, which causes them to pull back in alarm.

"Hey!" One of the girls snaps brashly, "Watch it!"

"I'm sorry!" Will pales, backing up, "I wasn't looking—"

But his apologies fall on deaf ears. The girls give him dirty scowls before walking off to another corner of the cafeteria. As they walk away, Will hears sharply whispered words prickly against his ears.

"What a freak!"

Will, unable to stop himself, feels his breath hitch. His throat tightens as he grips his tray harder.

It's okay, he assures himself, They just called you a freak, like everyone else does. It wasn't fairy or fag or...anything else...anything worse...

Even though the only people Will's come out to are his loved ones, he can't help but feel like everyone else knows somehow. Whenever he walks into school, it seems like there's practically a big, flashing neon sign above his head, pointing out just how *different* he is.

Will forces himself to take a deep, steadying breath.

You're just being paranoid, he tells himself, nobody knows and besides, there's nothing wrong with you, so even if they did—

"Will?"

The voice is quiet, yet it still audibly pierces through Will's consciousness, startling him. His eyes fly open, glancing around the area before he finally locates the source of the voice.

El is sitting at the edge of a table only a foot or two away from him. Despite all the available chairs at her table, she's seated alone. Unsurprisingly, she hasn't touched much of her lunch. As she looks over at Will, eyes wide with concern, he realizes that she probably witnessed his entire interaction with the other three girls.

Great.

"Hey, El," he greets, smiling nervously.

"Hi," El replies, giving him a small smile in return.

Will's brow furrows as he takes in the sight of her empty table. "What are you doing?" He inquires in confusion.

El glances down at her food. "Eating lunch?"

"By yourself?"

"Who else?" El mumbles wryly.

"With us!" Will replies with ease.

El is a little taken aback, but flattered. "Oh," she replies sheepishly.

Even though her first band practice had gone well yesterday (well, as in: she didn't make a complete fool of herself), she still didn't know what they thought of her. Was she just their coworker? Their acquaintance? Their only-on-Tuesday's friend?

She gets her answer when Will smiles at her and replies, "We're friends now, you gotta come sit with us."

El looks around the cafeteria. "Where?"

"Oh, we don't eat in here," Will explains.

"I can see why," El mutters, glancing in the direction of the three girls.

For a flashing moment, Will starts to feel that anxiety-ridden feeling tighten his gut, but he forces himself to shake it off.

"Yeah," he manages to reply, "Where we eat is...better than this."

El perks up at this and proceeds to rise from her seat. She takes her lunch tray and stands beside Will, looking excited. "Let's go then!" She smiles, giving him a playful nudge.

Her positivity is infectious, and as Will leads El out of the cafeteria, he feels his anxiety begin to slowly ebb away. Despite this, there are a few moments of hesitant silence as the pair walks through the hallways together, each debating how to start a conversation.

El finally breaks the silence by glancing down at her tray. "So, what is this supposed to be?" She asks, only half-joking.

"Mystery Meat," Will replies, crinkling his nose.

"Like what we had on Monday?"

"Like, the exact same thing, just reheated."

El mimics Will's expression of disgust as she sticks her tongue out. "Gross!"

"Very," Will nods, "Our lunches are never that good here."

"The lunches at my old school weren't either," El contends.

It's kind of a silly thing to take note of, but as Will turns to look at El, he notices that they're the same height. It's something he's not quite used to; while the rest of his friends experienced growth spurts throughout the past summers, he'd still stayed...well, small. It's nice to not have to crane his neck back so much. "Do you miss your old school?"

"Not really. I didn't have any friends." El winces as soon as she's spoken. She shouldn't have admitted that. Will is probably going to think she's super lame.

Thankfully, Will doesn't judge her, at least not outwardly. "Well, it's a good thing you've got us!" He remarks cheerily.

El throws him a grateful smile. The unfamiliar feeling of acceptance swells within her, leaving her elatedly giddy. She has friends, actual friends who invite her to eat lunch with them and let her hang out with them! She wishes she had a better way to express all the happy feelings bursting within her, to really show how grateful she is that they've given her a chance, but she knows that'd probably seem really weird.

"Thanks for letting me join the band," she settles for.

"Thanks for auditioning!" Will returns, "We're really going to be so much better with you here."

"When did you start the band?" El asks curiously.

"When we were 14," Will replies, smiling as he thinks back to that summer. It, like all of the summers they'd spent together, was full of happy memories that seemed to radiate with a golden warmth. Mornings spent biking to Mike's house for breakfasts of Eggo waffles and fresh strawberries. Afternoons spent scrounging through thrift stores and pawn shops for instruments. Evenings spent learning to

play said instruments, with mixed results. Late nights spent sprawled out on the grass in Mike's backyard, watching the stars and predicted how famous their band was going to be someday.

"It was kind of Mike's idea," Will says as he refocuses himself on the present conversation, "To start the band, I mean."

El knows it's stupid, but just hearing Mike's name mentioned makes her heart skip a beat. She really needs to get a hold of herself.

"Oh," She replies casually.

"Yeah," Will smiles. He pauses for a moment, then turns to look at El inquisitively, "Speaking of Mike—"

El's heart skips several times now. She feels like she's probably going to flatline if she doesn't calm down, but she can't help herself. When she thinks of Mike, she goes right back to those moments in Radio Shack. The way he'd ran a hand through his hair, the way he smiled at her, the way his eyes seemed to brighten when he saw her. There was something there, something potentially beautiful and wonderful, El just knew.

But then again, maybe she was just crazy. That was always a possibility.

"What about Mike?" El questions eagerly.

"Are you excited for your guitar lessons tomorrow?"

Excited, maybe, but if El's going to be honest, she feels pretty terrified. Not just because of the whole crush-thing, but also because of the she-doesn't-want-to-screw-up thing.

"I'm a little nervous," El admits.

"Why?" Will frowns.

"I just don't want to let you guys down," El explains, "Dustin and Lucas said I need to know how to play an instrument."

"I wouldn't worry about them," Will deflects, shaking his head,

"They're just being hard on you."

"I know," El sighs, "But...I want them to like me."

"They do!" Will insists, though as the words leave his mouth, the bitter taste of a lie lurks on his tongue. He knows that Lucas and Dustin still aren't thrilled about El joining the band; it was evident in the way they always got so surly and snappish whenever she was around. Will really needs to talk to them about it, but the idea of confronting them (or anyone really) just makes him quite nervous. Maybe he should ask Max or Mike to do it...

Thankfully, they reach the auditorium and Will doesn't have to dwell on these uneasy feelings for long.

The rest of their friends are seated on the stage. Dustin is proudly showing off his ability to balance a spoon on his nose while Lucas looks on skeptically, Mike cheers him on somewhat sarcastically, and Max tries to blow the spoon off.

"Asshole!" Dustin snaps as he pulls back from Max, causing the spoon to clatter to the ground.

"What are you guys doing?" Will calls out as he and El approach the stage.

The band members turn to look over at them, looking surprised to see El.

Mike can't stop himself from grinning as El and Will walk onstage and come to sit beside them. He would invite El to sit by him, but he worries that that'd seem too crush-like. Instead, he settles for throwing her a shy smile as she takes her seat next to Max.

"We were just screwing around," Max shrugs in reply to Will's question, "Dustin wanted to see how long he could balance the spoon."

"I was going to beat my record, too!" Dustin complains, "But then Max ruined it!"

"You should try again!" El suggests, "I'll hold Max back for you!"

"Traitor!" Max smiles, giving El a nudge.

As Dustin eyes El, he feels himself deflate like a popped balloon. Of course, El had to show up here — to *their* spot.

"That's okay," Dustin mumbles, turning his attention back to his tray of Mystery Meatloaf.

El's smile falters slightly as she feels a chilled tension pass between them.

Mike takes note of this potentially awkward situation and decides to cut in. "So El," he says, giving her a warm smile, "Are you ready for your first guitar lessons tomorrow?"

El smiles back at him. When she's looking into his eyes, it's hard to remember that just a couple minutes ago she was telling Will how nervous she was about the guitar lessons. Nervous? Not her. She's more than willing to be alone with Mike, even if she does embarrass herself in the process.

"I'm ready!" El nods, hoping she sounds more confident than she feels.

"Yeah, you're like, super lucky," Mike continues teasingly, "Do you know how many people would die to get lessons with the lead guitarist of the best band in Hawkins?"

"I'm gonna guess zero," Max snorts.

El snorts and giggles.

Lucas, on the other hand, isn't laughing. He knows Mike's probably just joking around, but his words still leave a bitter feeling in Lucas' gut. He turns to frown at Mike, unable to hide the resentful tinge to his voice. "Wait, what?"

"What do you mean, 'what'?" Mike asks back.

Lucas eyes him carefully, scrutinizingly. "Since when are you the lead guitarist?"

In reality, Lucas knows the answer. He knows Mike's always thought

of himself as the lead since the band was technically his idea. He knows that Mike always finds convenient ways to get all the good guitar solos for himself.

He just wants to see if Mike will own up to any of this.

"I dunno," Mike shrugs, "I guess I just assumed."

"Well, we never specifically agreed to that," Lucas reminds him.

"Yeah, I guess not," Mike replies, seemingly indifferent.

Mike's flippancy is driving Lucas crazy. It's belittling, almost — as if Lucas' concerns aren't even worth a second thought to Mike. The tension starts to swell in tenfold as silence settles over the pair, and even though Mike continues to ignore it, Lucas knows that he has to be sensing the uncomfortable nature of the conversation.

Everyone else seems to. Dustin is poking his lunch with his fork, glancing between Mike and Lucas anxiously. Will is chewing on his bottom lip, slightly swaying in place as if he was seated aboard a rocky boat. Max is toying with the ends of her hair distractedly, inadvertently giving herself several split ends.

"Well, I think you both play really good," El offers tentatively, "Practice was great yesterday."

Mike and Lucas both glance over at her, looking a little surprised.

"Uh, thanks," Lucas replies reluctantly.

"Yeah," Mike adds with a small smile.

As everyone returns their attention back to their lunches, the bitter tension seems to dissipate. The rest of the band is just relieved that things have finally blown over.

Mike and Lucas, knowing better, exchange quick, disdainful glances. They both know that whatever's brewing between them isn't quick over, not yet.

Like their terrible lunch, it's simply been pushed aside for another

day.

"Are you sure it's just a guitar lesson?" Hopper calls out from the living room.

"What else would it be?" El calls back from her bedroom.

"I dunno," Hopper replies in a tone that reveals he definitely knows, "Like a date?"

El's cheeks flush crimson as she continues to rifle through her closet. "What?!" She exclaims indignantly.

"You just seem to be putting in an awful lot of effort for 'just a guitar lesson,' is all I'm saying."

"I am not!" El huffs.

She totally is.

It's kind of silly, really, since she saw Mike earlier at school today. But now that she's home and waiting until 5:00 rolls around so she can head to Mike's, she's realizing that maybe she should actually try to look nice.

You know, for reasons. Reasons that she doesn't need her dad speculating about.

She pulls out two sweaters from her closet: one pink and one light blue. She bites down on her lower lip as she examines them both skeptically. The pink one is prettier, but she'd already worn it to Radio Shack last week — what if Mike thinks she owns like, no clothes? The blue one is nice enough, but what if it's too...depressing, or something?

When she can't come to a decision, she dashes into the living room.

When El and Hopper moved to Hawkins, they traded their cramped apartment for a slightly more spacious flat. El was still trying to adjust to the change. She didn't have to climb several flights of stairs or take the elevator to enter her home, and there wasn't a fire escape

outside of her room to sit on and watch traffic go by. Instead of a kitchenette, they had an actual kitchen, and the living room and dining room were two separate spaces.

The one thing that hasn't changed is that it's still relatively easy for El to dash from her bedroom to her Dad's favorite spot: the living room couch. When El rushes in, he's flipping through the newspaper and smoking a cigarette.

"Which sweater is better?" El asks as she skids to a stop.

Hopper folds over the top edge of his newspaper and eyes her warily. "What?"

"I don't know what to wear," El reiterates, holding up one sweater in each hand, "Pink or blue?"

Hopper raises an eyebrow. "Why does it matter?"

"I want to look nice!"

"For a guitar lesson?"

"Yes!"

When Hopper only continues to give her that skeptical, I-don't-believe-a-single-word-of-what-you're-saying look, El rushes to her own defense.

"I need to look professional," El explains, "Because I'm in a real band now."

(Said 'real' band doesn't write their own music, doesn't have a name, has never played a gig, is pretty much unknown by everyone, and is nowhere near professional, but he doesn't have to know that.)

Hopper continues to look her over for a moment before commenting, "I didn't even know you liked music."

"I like music!" El insists.

"—Or knew how to play an instrument."

"That's what the lessons are for!"

"Private lessons."

"Yes!"

"With a teenage boy."

"His name is Mike!"

"So I've heard."

El drums her foot as she grows increasingly impatient. "Pink or blue?"

They hold each other's gazes for a moment, silently challenging the other's stance.

Once Hopper is evidently aware of the fact that El's not going to be deterred from spending time alone with Mike, he relents.

"Blue," he sighs, turning back to his newspaper.

"Is it too somber?"

"It's a *sweater*."

"You're right," El nods, smiling at her own silly question. With that, she hurries back into her room to change.

"I still don't know how I feel about this whole thing," Hopper calls out.

"Why!?" El huffs, voice muffled as she pulls the sweater over her head.

"It's just...what do you even know about this kid?"

"You said you knew him!" El reminds him, alluding to the conversation that started this entire banter between them. After smoothing down her sweater, she moves to her vanity mirror and begins brushing her hair back.

"I said I knew his *father*," Hopper clarifies, "We went to high school

around the same time together. I have no idea what his kid is like, but considering what I know about Ted—"

"Hey!" El snaps, cutting him off.

"I'm just saying you better hope that the apple fell far from the tree on that one, kid," Hopper continues, a teasing, light-hearted edge to his voice.

El gives a dismissive huff as she finishes tying her hair back in a short little ponytail. "Mike's *great!*"

"I'm sure he is."

El adds a few finishing touches to her look (a swipe of lip gloss, a spritz of perfume) before returning to the living room.

"He is!" She insists, moving to grab her dad by the arm and pull him off the couch, "Now, let's go!"

Hopper gives a discontented grunt as he allows himself to be pulled up by her. "What's the rush?"

"It's 4:50!" El exclaims, "I'm supposed to be there in ten minutes!"

Hopper grumbles something incoherent in reply, but as it's probably yet another gripe at Mike's expense, El is perfectly fine with not hearing it.

Since Hawkins' public transportation system is pretty much non-existent and Hopper has the night off, he offered to drive El to her lessons and pick her up when she was done. It's kinda embarrassing, having to be dropped off by her dad, but it was either that or not going at all (or asking Max, but that seemed like it'd be even weirder).

El and Hop head outside, board the police cruiser, and commence the drive to Mike's house. As El instructs her dad on what turns to make, her heart pounds in her chest, electrified with anxious nerves.

Just breathe, she reminds herself, *It's just a guitar lesson.*

Just a guitar lesson with the cutest boy El's ever seen, but whatever.

Ten minutes later, Hopper comes to a stop in front of the Wheeler's home. El hurries to unbuckle her seatbelt and exit the car, but her dad evidently has a few last words to get off his chest.

"At 9:00, I'm going to be right here to pick you up," Hopper reminds her.

"I know," El sighs, placing her hand over the door handle.

"No funny business."

"None!"

"If you wanna leave early, you call me, okay?"

"Okay!"

Hopper eyes her carefully before echoing, "Okay."

El gives him a reassuring smile as she leans in to give him a quick hug. It's a little clumsy since she has to lean across the gearshift and everything, but the sentiment is what really matters.

"Thank you! Bye!" She exclaims as she pulls away.

Hopper grumbles a farewell in response, but El is already exiting the car and hurrying to the front door. She realizes halfway across the Wheeler's front lawn that she probably shouldn't run, she needed to look more calm and collected. Like she's totally not freaking out.

She slows into a relaxed, yet confident walk as she approaches the front door and knocks. The last time she was here was Tuesday — no one had been home to answer the door, so she'd just followed the sound of chatter and music to the garage.

This time around, Mike opens the door. He smiles warmly at El, but the look doesn't quite meet his eyes.

"Hey, El!" He greets, trying to muster up as much enthusiasm as possible. It's not that he doesn't want her here, or anything, because

he definitely does, he just kinda wishes he didn't have to be here at his house right now.

"Hi, Mike!" El smiles.

"Let's get started," Mike mumbles hurriedly. He reaches out to grab her hand as he guides her into the house. Maybe if they hurry, they won't have to deal with—

"Michael?"

Shit.

His mother emerges from the kitchen, a curious look on her face. When she sees El, the look changes into a bright smile. It's the same smile she always gives when company's over, when she has to act like everything's just fine. Like she and Mike's dad haven't been arguing all afternoon, and only just stopped five minutes ago when Ted took off to 'get some air.'

"You must be Eleanor!" Mrs. Wheeler says, moving forward to give El a short hug, "Michael's told me a lot about you!"

"Yeah, yeah," Mike grouses. Still holding El's hand, he continues to guide El down the hallway the second his mother pulls back, "We gotta go, Mom!"

"Alright," His mother replies, that disingenuously bright smile still plastered across her face, "Just let me know if you two need anything!"

What Mike needs is a distraction. He continues to guide El down the hallway, forcing himself to push his parents' problems out of his mind.

"Sorry we had to start late," Mike says as he opens the door that leads into the garage, "I had to pick up my sister Holly from school."

"You have a sister?"

"Yeah, two. Nancy's in college, Holly's in elementary school."

They step into the garage and Mike begins the task of turning on all the lights. As he moves about the space and plugs in everything, El examines the area more closely. Even though they're in a garage, there's something about the space that's remarkably cozy. Maybe it's the space heater in the corner or the photographs on the wall (the photos show the band engaged in various activities, like sitting in the back of Max's van, lounging around the beach, and hanging out with an older boy that El doesn't recognize — Will's not in any of the photos, so El assumes he must have taken all of these).

Or maybe it's because Mike's here. That's always a viable option.

As Mike finishes setting everything up, he turns to glance at her warily. "Next time, you can just come around to the garage, if you want," he says, "Instead of walking through the house."

El smiles teasingly, "Why? You don't want me to run into your parents?"

Mike doesn't reply to that. For a moment, El sees a shadow pass over his face, but then it's gone again.

Something seems off. She considers pressing the issue further, but something in her gut tells her that it'd be better to hold off. After all, maybe she's just seeing things...

Mike grabs two guitars from their stands and moves to sit on the couch, motioning for El to join him. For a moment, El thinks she's seeing double, but no, Mike actually owns two models of the exact same guitar.

"Why do you have two guitars?" El asks as she sits beside him.

"One for me, one for you," Mike shrugs.

"I meant, why do you have two of the same one?"

"Oh, right," Mike replies, glancing down at the guitars as if he'd just realized this, "Basically, my mom bought me one for Christmas, then my dad heard I liked guitars and accidentally bought the same one she did."

El smiles incredulously, unsure if she should make any comments on that. She's starting to see why her dad may have been skeptical of Mr. Wheeler, though.

Mike takes note of the perplexed look on El's face and gives her a small smile. "Yeah, my dad's kind of an idiot."

El attempts to hold back her giggles but only winds up snorting instead. "You shouldn't say that!" She exclaims.

Mike still can't get over how great her laugh is. Even though he's still feeling a little shitty, just seeing her smile is already helping his mood immensely. "It's true, he is!" He insists, smiling despite himself.

El's hesitant giggles finally die down as Mike passes one of the guitars and a spare pick to her. She holds the items carefully, looking at them as if they were alien artifacts.

"So, how do I..." El begins hesitantly.

"Here," Mike smiles. He leans in and carefully moves her hands to rest over the guitar in the correct position. As he places the guitar pick between her fingers, he feels an almost electric sort of spark pass between them.

El blushing allows herself to be positioned by Mike. She finds herself holding her breath as his hands carefully move over her.

"Now," Mike says as he pulls back and grabs his own guitar, "These are both Fender Stratocasters."

"Okay," El nods, completely lost.

Despite her vocal affirmation, her confusion reads all over her face. Her brow is furrowed in a curiously confused sort of way that probably shouldn't be as cute as Mike thinks it is.

"Don't worry," Mike assures her with another smile, "We're gonna take it slow."

El breathes out in relief. "Okay," she repeats, sounding far more relaxed this time.

Mike begins to talk her through the basics. Despite how jumpy he feels sitting next to El like this — their gazes locked, knees brushing together — once he starts talking about how to play the guitar, his nerves start to subside.

This is something comfortable for him; after all, he's had to do it before. Lucas didn't know much about guitars when they first formed their band, so the two of them had spent most of their freshman year hanging out at each other's houses, learning together, riffing off each other, and goofing around.

Of course, that had been with his best friend, not an insanely pretty girl. Mike has to put in way more effort to make sure his instructions are top-notch.

Despite Mike's patient guidance, it's a pretty rough start. El gets visibly frustrated whenever she doesn't understand what Mike's talking about or when she screws up a chord. She huffs grumpily, bites down on her lower lip, and glares at the guitar as if it'd personally offended her somehow.

But she doesn't give up. For every aggravating misstep, El finds herself only further determined to get it right. She keeps practicing, keeps following Mike's soothing directions, and around the 2-hour mark, she successfully manages to play a simple riff. It's nothing crazy, just a few chords, but it actually sounds like part of a song and not a heap of jumbled notes.

"I got it!" El exclaims once she finished, beaming up at Mike ecstatically.

"Yeah, you did!" Mike beams back, raising his hand.

El high-fives him, still smiling proudly. The glowing feeling of accomplishment leaves her feeling euphoric — like she could handle anything. She knows that her guitar-playing skills are elementary at best, but some progress is still better than none at all.

"Alright," Mike continues, returning his hands to his guitar, "So, now that you've got all the basics down, are you ready to start learning a real song?"

The prospect is a little daunting, but El still nods confidently. "What song?"

Mike gives her a shy glance. "I was thinking you might wanna learn *Blackbird*?"

A warm, tingly feeling spreads across El's cheeks as she smiles back at him. "Oh?" She asks, voice pitching a little higher than usual.

Mike isn't sure if the way her voice rises is due to shyness, discomfort, or a combination of both. Either way, he hurries to offer an explanation that (hopefully) won't make him sound like a lovesick wastoid. "Since you sang it at your audition, and everything!" He says hastily, "Also, it's one of the first songs I learned, too."

"Okay!" El nods. Her heart starts fluttering again as she inches a little closer to him and readies the guitar in her hands, "I'm ready!"

As Mike begins to teach her the chords, El can't help but wonder if this is *their* song. Not that they're even together like that, but still. If they were, would this be it?

Once the idea implants itself in her brain, there's no shaking it. The thought only adds more pressure for El to play the song perfectly, which naturally causes her to mess up way more than she would otherwise.

Mike's trying to walk her through the opening notes, but it's not going very well.

"No, no, no," he chastises gently, "You're plucking the strings in the wrong order. It's mixing up the notes."

"How do I fix it?" El pouts.

"Like this," Mike replies, demonstrating the proper technique.

El watches him carefully, but upon trying to do it herself, only fumbles the chord again. As she continues to mess up, she feels her euphoric sense of accomplishment slip right through her hands.

El stops to collect herself and give her aching fingers a rest. "I'm

sorry," she mutters, ducking her head in shame, "I can't do it."

"Yes, you can!" Mike assures her, "Practice makes perfect, right?"

"Right," El mumbles dejectedly.

Mike studies her somber demeanor for a moment before getting an idea. "Do you mind if I try something?" He asks tentatively.

El glances at him, puzzled, "Sure?"

Mike takes a steadying breath before setting his guitar aside and sliding closer to El. One arm wraps around her back as the other curves around her side. He can hear El's breath hitch as he places his hands directly over hers.

"We'll just go through it together," Mike explains. He hopes that El can't feel how fast his heart is pounding right now, but considering his chest is pressed up against her back, she probably can.

"Okay," El manages to choke out. She's surprised she's able to form any words at all, considering her brain is pretty much short-circuiting right now. All of her senses are just overwhelmed with *Mike*. The tingly feeling of Mike's hands holding hers, the scent of Mike's soap filling her nose, the rise and fall of Mike's chest against her back.

She's going completely crazy.

Mike gently begins to guide her fingers over the correct strings, showing her exactly how to play the song. El watches their fingers in awe as Mike leads them expertly, and before long the familiar notes of *Blackbird* begin to echo throughout the garage.

"Alright," Mike murmurs once he's finished playing through the intro and chorus, "Now you try."

Though he lowers his hands, he doesn't move away (not that El minds this in the slightest). It's so hard to focus on playing when he's literally *right there*, but El somehow manages to do it anyway.

Her notes are slow and hesitant, but noticeably better than her previous attempts. As she repeats the movements Mike just walked

her through, she turns to glance over her shoulder at him.

"Like this?" She whispers hopefully.

Their faces are close — dangerously close. So close that, when Mike looks back at her, their noses kinda brush. If he moved a few centimeters closer, he could totally kiss her. Like, if he wanted to.

Does he want to?

As his gaze falls to her invitingly soft lips, he can't think of a reason to *not* want to.

"Uh, yeah," he murmurs, eyes slightly glazed over, "Just like that."

As El looks back at him, she finds herself taken aback by the dreamy glint in his eyes. He looks so helplessly enamored, so completely captivated by her, that El finds herself a little overwhelmed. She's not used to having guys look at her like this, not guys she likes as much as Mike, anyway.

It's a feeling that leaves her breathlessly light-headed. The intensity of it all is too much for her to handle right now, so she hastily looks away and focuses her attention back on the guitar, heart pounding.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

"Good," she says as she clears her throat, not quite sure what she's even referring to anymore, "That's good."

Mike blinks at her a few times, dispelling the lovesick daze he was under. "Yeah!" He replies quickly, pulling his arms away from her, "You're, uh, doing great."

El pouts a little as his arms leave her sides. The warmth of his touch fades away, leaving her stiff and cold. Maybe she shouldn't have looked away quite so quickly...

Mike's throat starts to grow dry as he glances around the garage nervously. This is getting increasingly awkward; he needs a distraction before it gets worse (if it's even possible for it to get worse).

When his gaze lands on his guitar, he nearly breathes an outward sigh of relief. *Right*. He's supposed to be giving her lessons. Time to get back to that.

"Why don't we try playing the song at the same time?" He suggests as he picks up his guitar, "Since you seem to have a lot of it figured out."

El gives him a hopeful smile. "Will you help me if I need it?"

(Translation: will you totally put your arms around me again if I ask for it?)

As Mike smiles back at her, the tense moment of awkwardness fades away as quickly as it came. "Of course," he assures her.

El brightens at this. She can't help but feel like they're caught in a push-and-pull at the moment; growing closer, pulling back, coming together again. They're both testing the waters, or testing each other, to be more accurate.

As Mike begins to play the song on his guitar, El does her best to keep up. She can tell he's playing a little slower than usual, probably so she doesn't fall behind. While some might find that disparaging, El is immensely appreciative that he's so considerate.

It's going far more smoothly than either of them expected. Even when El falters, she picks right back up again, strumming her guitar in time with Mike. The reverberating twangs of their notes fill the garage with a warm sound. It brings El right back to her audition, when time and space had stood still, when it'd been only her and Mike.

Maybe that's why she starts singing.

She's not consciously aware that she's doing it, but as they continue to play, she finds herself singing the words under her breath, just as she had at her audition. As the words fall from her lips, everything else starts to fade away: the chirp of the crickets outside, the hum of the space heater, the muffled sounds of passing cars. Only the sound of their playing remains —

— followed by the sound of Mike's voice.

It's a little rough and a little low, but El's ear catches the faint sound of Mike joining in with her. She can see his lips — pink and slightly chapped — moving as he quietly sings along.

It's blissfully natural, the way her voice melds with Mike's. A strange, intense feeling strikes her like a bolt of lightning, just like it had in Radio Shack. His singing is *doing* things, making her feel...more. There's no proper word for it, it's just *more*. More happy, more captivated, more alive, somehow.

Though that intensely overwhelming feeling is back, El dares herself to meet his gaze. To her surprise, she finds that he's already looking back at her, eyes glazed over once more.

Magic, she thinks nonsensically, *this is what magic must feel like*.

She's pretty sure they're not singing anymore. Maybe they are, she honestly isn't lucid enough to tell. All she knows she is that she's definitely stopped playing, because her hands are currently elsewhere. Her fingers, seemingly moving of their own accord, have slipped off the guitar and are slowly inching to rest on Mike's thigh.

She's not sure what she's doing, or what she wants, or what she expects. In fact, she can't stop to process what's happening or to think anything at all. All she knows is that Mike's stopped playing too, his hand is cautiously resting on her leg, they're moving in closer, her eyes are fluttering closed, and —

The doorbell is ringing.

The sound echoes throughout the Wheeler's home and into the garage like a clock striking midnight. El and Mike pull back with a start, eyes wide and cheeks flushed a brilliant red.

Oh my god, Mike thinks desperately.

Oh my god, El thinks disappointedly.

"That's, uh, probably my Dad," El mumbles hastily, pulling back even more.

"Probably!" Mike replies thickly. *Holy shit*, they'd literally *almost*

kissed and Mike's not sure if he's mad that they'd gotten interrupted or embarrassed that he'd even tried to kiss her in the first place. His whole body feels like it's on fire as he glances down at his watch.

9:00.

Mike didn't know it was possible for four hours to pass by so quickly, and yet, it has. He and El exchange anxious smiles as they both rise to their feet. Their flustered embarrassment radiates from their burning cheeks, cautious glances, and hesitant movements.

"Well," Mike begins, fingering the neck of his guitar distractedly, "I think we made a lot of progress."

"Yes!" El nods briskly, "We did!"

There's another moment of awkward silence before Mike finally meets her gaze. "So...do you...uh...wanna do this again next Thursday?"

(Please say yes, please say yes, please say yes.)

El smiles shyly as she tucks a strand of hair behind her ear and nods. "Yes."

Mike tries his best to not grin like a total dweeb, he really does, but he can't help it. Giving El guitar lessons has to be the best idea he's ever come up with — he'd literally do anything to make it happen again.

"Awesome!" He beams.

El gives him an affectionate nod as the two begin to pack up. As Mike brings his guitar over to its stand, El follows him from behind, still holding his other guitar.

Mike looks over his shoulder and notices her trailing after him. "What?" He asks curiously.

"Here's your guitar back," El offers, holding it out to him.

Mike's brow furrows as he turns to face her. He looks at the guitar for

a moment, glances up at El, and that's when he makes a decision. "Keep it," he says simply, "It's yours."

El's eyes nearly bug out of her head, she looks so shocked. "*What!?*" She exclaims, completely aghast.

"I'm serious!" Mike insists.

"*Mike!*"

"El!"

"I'm not taking your guitar!" El balks, shaking her head.

"I already have one!" Mike insists, "I don't need two of the exact same kind! Besides, how else are you going to practice outside of our lessons?"

El blinks at him wordlessly, her mouth slightly ajar. "I...I can't..." she manages to reply meekly, "I can't take your guitar, Mike."

"Yes, you can," Mike assures her. He steps forward, places his hand over hers, and gently lowers her outstretched arm. "I want you to have it."

El's stares at him for a moment longer, but eventually her shocked expression fades into a grateful smile as she clutches the guitar closer to her. "Thank you," she murmurs, ducking her head shyly.

If El thought she might have feelings for Mike before, her crush has officially exploded like, times a million. Her heart soars in her chest the entire time Mike walks her to the front door. Hopper is waiting in the foyer, chatting with Mrs. Wheeler when El and Mike, smiling contently, walk in.

Hopper eyes El's elated expression, as well as the new guitar in her arms, but says nothing. Well, at least he doesn't until they've left the Wheelers and are headed home.

"So," Hopper asks as he drives, "How was your 'just a guitar lesson?'"

Perfect? Amazing? Out-of-this-world? Radical? Totally tubular?

"It was fine," El says simply, holding her guitar in her lap.

Hopper glances at the passenger's seat where she sits. "Just fine?"

El turns to look back at him, and though her insides are still a jumbled, fluttery, haywire mess, her voice is calm, cool, and collected when she answers.

"Just fine."

Even though it's a pretty lame pastime, Max can't get enough of bowling. There's just something so satisfying about getting to chuck a huge ass ball at a bunch of pins and watch them all fall down. Plus, the snacks at the bowling alley are amazing, rivaled only perhaps by Benny's. The band spent a lot of summer nights going head to head in all sorts of combinations. They spent so much time at the bowling alley that they even tried asking the manager if their band could play a gig there (to which he replied, 'unfortunately, I don't think there'd be a place for that in this establishment,' to which Mike muttered, 'screw you, too').

Sure, it's dorky, but so are Max and the guys, so it fits. Hanging out there is a pastime as natural as going to Mike's house, the movies, or the arcade. That's probably why when Max finds out El's never been bowling, she's so shocked.

"How have you never been bowling?" She exclaims indignantly. It's lunchtime on a Friday, they're all seated at their usual spot, and while the band's known El for over two weeks now, they definitely weren't ready for this bombshell of an admission.

"There weren't any bowling alleys by my apartment," El explains (nor any friends for her to go with, but that's beside the point).

"Chicago sounds terrible," Lucas remarks, "No offense."

El shrugs the comment aside.

Max is still reeling from the revelation. "We have to take you then!" She insists, "We can go tomorrow night — Saturdays is when they do cosmic bowling!"

El's brow furrows in confusion. "Cosmic...bowling?"

"It's when they turn all the lights off!" Mike explains eagerly, "And everything is all glow-in-the-dark, and there's like cool flashing lights, and it makes you feel like you're in outer space!"

"And they play lots of disco music!" Will adds.

El's eyes widen with excitement. "That sounds like fun!"

"Then let's do it!" Max grins, "Tomorrow night, all of us. You're gonna love it, El."

"I can't go," Dustin cuts in flatly.

Max grits her teeth as she turns to look at him. If this is about his stupid Yoko Ono bullshit, she's going to lose her mind. "Why not?" She asks just as flatly.

"Steve's sleeping over tomorrow night," Dustin explains.

"Who's Steve?" El questions.

Dustin eyes her carefully as he replies, "He's my friend. He's in college, and he's coming to spend the weekend with me."

"You see Steve like, every other week!" Max huffs.

"So, what?" Dustin defends, "I'm just supposed to blow him off for — "

He doesn't have to finish the sentence for Max to know exactly what he's thinking. *El*. He doesn't want to do anything for El, for some asinine reason.

Max rolls her eyes as she inhales deeply. "What time is Steve coming over tomorrow?" She asks patiently.

"He said he was going to be coming over late, like, after 10."

"Then we'll just go before then," Mike shrugs, "And Steve can just pick you up when we're done."

Dustin blinks at him, as if he's trying to find a flaw in that plan.

Evidently coming up blank, he sighs and returns his focus to his lunch. "Okay," he concedes, "Let's go bowling, then."

And so they do.

When they meet up at 6:30 the next evening, the bowling alley is already decked out in its full cosmic-glory. The lights are dimmed, swirling colorful lights dance over the walls, and an upbeat ABBA song is playing over the speakers. The space echoes with the sounds of pins clattering over and the faint buzz of neon lights.

El is glancing around at everything with rapt fascination, allowing herself to be guided along by the rest of the group. As Max helps her pick out a pair of bowling shoes, the boys take upon the task of splitting up the teams.

"Only four people can play in one lane at a time," Mike reminds them.

"Why don't we do three and three?" Will suggests, "That way it's fair."

"Good idea," Dustin nods.

"Well, I wanna be with Max," Lucas requests.

"I wanna go with Lucas and Max," Dustin pleads hastily.

Will eyes him. "Why?" He asks somewhat challengingly.

Dustin hesitates, "Because I know them better."

"Or because you don't want to be with El?" Will counters.

Mike's neck nearly snaps from how fast he turns to glare at Dustin. "What's wrong with El?"

"Nothing!" Dustin exclaims.

Will's surprised that he's able to speak up like this, but Dustin's obvious disdain towards El deserves some addressing. "You act weird around her," Will states.

"No, I don't!"

"You kind of do," Lucas contends.

"I thought you didn't trust her either!" Dustin points out indignantly.

"I guess I didn't," Lucas admits, "Like, at first. But she's a good singer, and she's pretty nice. Max seems to really like her, so I trust her judgment, okay?"

Dustin pouts, looking a little frustrated. "But—"

"You need to be nice to her," Will directs with a surprising amount of authority, "She's a part of our group now."

As Dustin glances around at the other guys, he realizes he's outnumbered here. "Well, shit," he sighs, "I'm sorry. I guess I'll try harder to be nice."

"Good," Mike replies, still looking a little miffed that Dustin ever talked ill of El to begin with.

"Alright," Will continues, looking directly at Dustin and Mike, "So, I'll play against Lucas and Max, and then you guys can play against El."

Dustin swallows back his exclamation of protest and nods. No more whining — he's gotta force himself to get over this change, whether he's thrilled about it or not.

As if on cue, the girls return wearing the proper shoes and carrying bowling balls.

"Are you guys ready?" El asks chipperly.

"They don't even have their shoes on yet," Max scoffs, "They're just standing around talking like a bunch of girls."

"You're girls!" Dustin points out.

"Your point?" Max counters, unfazed.

"C'mon," Lucas snorts, leading the guys over to the shoe counter, "Let's just get started."

After the boys gear up, the band heads to two lanes located right next to each other. Mike and El are walking close to each other as Mike gives her a quick run-down of the rules of the game.

"It's pretty self-explanatory once you get started," Mike summarizes.

"Just don't get it in the gutter," Will adds.

"Or step over the line, then you'll slip and fall on your face," Max snorts.

"Okay!" El replies somewhat anxiously.

"Don't worry, you're gonna be fine," Lucas shrugs, "Bowling is easy."

"That's easy for you to say," Max smirks, "You're like, amazing at it."

"So are you!" Lucas replies with a smile.

"The couple that bowls together, stays together," Dustin jokes wryly.

El's eyebrows raise in surprise. "You're a couple?"

"Unfortunately," Max jokes.

"Hey!" Lucas exclaims as the rest of their friends snort and giggle.

Max gives him a teasing smile as she leans in to press a reassuring kiss to his cheek. The action, though small, seems to calm Lucas immensely, and he relaxes into a content grin.

"Ugh, you guys are so gross!" Mike jokes.

"Like you should talk," Max mutters under her breath.

Mike throws her a wide-eyed look, but it seems to be that he's the only person who picked up on the jab. Thank god.

After that, the band proceeds to split up into the two lanes and start playing. Since the lanes are beside each other, they're able to chat as a group and watch everyone play.

El watches everyone else go first before stepping up to take her turn.

She cradles her bowling ball carefully as she stares the pins down, eyes narrowed with determination.

"You got this, El!" Mike cheers on.

El takes a deep breath, swings her arm back, and launches the ball forward. It lands on the slippery lane with a loud *THUD*, rolls down the rest of the way, and knocks over three pins on the left side.

"I knocked some over!" El exclaims, turning to beam back at everyone excitedly.

As the band claps for El and gives her some congratulatory remarks, Dustin finds himself fairly unimpressed. She didn't even hit most of them, and yet everyone else is acting like this is the coolest shit ever. He doesn't get what the big deal is, honestly.

When it's his turn to play, he actually manages to knock down nine pins on his first try. Despite this, he doesn't get a round of applause like El did for her *three pins*.

Well, technically he does — but only from one person.

There's a row of booths that run along the front of the bowling lanes. El is seated in one of them, along with the other band members who aren't currently bowling (Mike, Will, Max).

"Good job, Dustin!" El beams as she claps for him, "That was good!"

Seriously, why did she have to be so nice? It would be so much easier to dislike her if she was like, secretly evil or something.

"Thanks," Dustin mumbles, grudgingly walking to sit beside her in the booth.

Mike, seated on El's other side, opens his mouth to say something, but is cut off by the sudden sound of Lucas cheering.

"Holy shit!" Lucas exclaims gleefully. He's standing in front of his lane, pointing to the scoreboard proudly, "Did you see that?!"

"That's your third strike in a row!" Will smiles, seated across from

Mike.

"Nice!" Max nods, looking impressed.

Mike frowns a little. He knows it's pretty dumb, but he can't help but feel a little jealous. He hasn't gotten a single strike yet — he doesn't want El (or the rest of his friends) to think that he's like, a total wimp compared to Lucas.

"Hey, Lucas!" He calls out, drumming his leg against the floor.

Lucas eyes him as he walks back to the booth. "What?"

"We should go head-to-head," Mike suggests, "You know, guitarist against guitarist?"

Max rolls her eyes as she groans. "Please don't."

The prospect of a challenge causes Lucas to get an excited gleam in his eye. "You're on, Mike!" He smiles, placing his hands on his hips, "Just try not to cry too hard when I cream you."

Mike grins back mischievously as he gets up from the booth. "You wish."

Max makes another annoyed groan as she starts to pound her head against the table.

"What's so bad about a competition?" El giggles at Max.

"Because!" Max grumbles, voice muffled as she rests her head on the table, "It's like their stupid version of a guitarist dick-measuring contest."

"No, it's not!" Mike insists, crossing his arms over his chest defensively.

"So, it's not like the time you guys challenged to each other to a milkshake-drinking challenge at Benny's?" Max counters, lifting her head to raise an eyebrow at him, "And you both puked your brains out afterward?"

Mike glances at El just in time to catch sight of her crinkling up her nose. "Oh my god!" Mike exclaims, cheeks burning in embarrassment, "It's not like that!"

"Or the time you guys tried to race bikes and crashed into a tree?"

"How were we supposed to know that the curb was so uneven?" Lucas defends.

"You guys split your chins open!"

"It was worth it!"

"C'mon, Lucas," Mike huffs, walking over to the bowling lane, "Let's just get started!"

"You can take my place, Mike," Max states, standing up from the booth, "I'm getting hungry."

El perks up at the mention of food. "I'm hungry too!"

"Let's go get some food then," Max offers, motioning for El to follow her, "The snacks here are the shit."

"Who am I going to play against?" Dustin pouts.

"Will can take my place," Mike offers.

"Okay!" Will smiles.

The boys pair off to continue their bowling matches as Max leads El over to the concessions counter. There are so many options — theater candy boxes, popcorn, soft pretzels, nachos, cotton candy — that El doesn't know where she should even start. Max suggests her favorite, a salted pretzel *with* nacho cheese, so the girls wind up leaving the concession stand with two matching snacks.

They find their own private booth to sit in so that they can watch the boys play without having to listen to their 'fatuous conversations,' as Max eloquently puts it.

"So, you guys come here a lot?" El asks as she and Max, seated across

from each other, begin to dig into their pretzels.

"Yeah," Max nods.

El watches as Max dips her pretzel into the cup of cheese sauce and follows her lead. The warm dough practically melts in her mouth and El hums contently. "I can see why," she gushes, mouth full of pretzel.

Max smiles at El as she takes a bite of her own pretzel. "We spent so much time here over the summer, it was kind of crazy."

"Really?"

Max nods again. "This summer was like, awesome. Since I got my creepy-person van and Mike got his car, we gotta just do whatever we wanted. We like, went to the beach all the time, and made 1 AM Slurpee-runs to the 7-Eleven, and went camping, and everything."

As El listens to Max describe the events of the past summer, she finds it odd that she's able to miss something she was never a part of. "That sounds like so much fun," she sighs wistfully.

"It was, but don't worry," Max replies reassuringly, "You didn't miss out, because we're gonna get to do even *more* awesome stuff now that you're here!"

El eyes her hopefully. "Really?"

"Yeah, totally! I mean, we even are right now!"

"You're right!" El smiles as the realization dawns on her.

As the girls continue to munch on their snacks, they turn to watch the boys play. Lucas and Mike are pretty neck-in-neck, surprisingly. Their scores are nearly the same, though Lucas currently has the upper hand.

Will and Dustin seem to be taking things less seriously and are trying to see who can throw the bowling ball in the silliest way. Dustin does a graceful pirouette and blindly throws the ball with his eyes closed, causing Will to nearly die of laughter.

"God, they're such dweebs," Max snorts, but despite her teasing words, her gaze is warm and affectionate.

"How did you guys become friends?" El asks, turning to look at her.

"We met in kindergarten," Max replies, "We all liked the same stuff, so it just kind of happened, you know?"

"When did you start dating Lucas?" El asks with a giggle.

Even though Max rolls her eyes in response, El still notices the smile she's failing to hide. "8th grade," Max replies, "But I'm pretty sure Lucas liked me earlier. When we first met, he tried to win me over with his crayon box. It was one of those fancy ones with like, 128 colors and a sharpener, or whatever. Turns out it wasn't even his. Will just let him borrow it so Lucas could impress me."

At that anecdote, El's giggles dissolve into delighted snorts of laughter.

Max feels her cheeks flush even redder as El continues to laugh. "Yeah, it's pretty lame," she mumbles.

"No! It's not lame!" El beams, "It's cute!"

"Oh!" Max relaxes, brightening noticeably.

El's laughs die down into another content smile as she turns her attention back to the boys. Mike and Lucas are joking around about something, and as Lucas says something to him, Mike throws his head back in a loud laugh.

Max eyes El carefully. Though the lights are dim, she can easily see the major heart-eyes El's giving Mike right now. It's not even subtle, like, at all.

"So, when did you start liking Mike?" Max asks as El returns her attention to her food.

The question is posed at the exact moment El takes a bite of her pretzel, so she consequently sputters and chokes in response.

"Mike?!" El exclaims once her windpipe is clear.

"You were totally just checking him out!" Max smirks.

"I was not!"

"You so were."

El continues to sputter and scoff defensively. "It's not like that!"

"Oh yeah, *sure!*" Max replies dryly, "You're *totally* not into him. You weren't just checking him out, and you guys haven't been attached at the hip all night, or having private guitar lessons, which I'm pretty sure is just a euphemism at this point—"

At the last statement, El's heart starts to pound a little faster. She's had two lessons with Mike now. This past Thursday's lesson wasn't really anything like their first. Though her skills were slowly improving, there hadn't been another *moment* like the one they shared the first time. Maybe their first lesson had been a fluke or something.

"I don't like him," El reiterates.

Max knows that the guys aren't crazy about Mike liking El, but at the same time, Max could honestly care less about the whole Yoko Ono business. It was stupid, really. Besides, Dustin and Lucas always had to be such spazzes about everything; it was hard to take them seriously sometimes.

So, really, there's nothing stopping Max from fanning the flames, at least a little.

"Well, I guess it's better off that you don't like him," Max says casually, "Since he's got a girlfriend."

El pales, leaving her face awash by the neon lights. "He does?!" She exclaims, unable to hide her shocked dismay.

"Nope," Max smirks, taking a bite of her soft pretzel.

El flushes beet red as she gives Max a frustrated nudge. "I can't

believe you!" She huffs.

"And I can't believe you!" Max replies with a smirk, "You've got the hots for Wheeler."

"I don't!" El insists, but even to her own ears the words sound pitifully disingenuous, "We're just friends."

"Just friends' don't sound so upset when they hear the other person is dating someone," Max points out.

El avoids Max's teasing gaze and focuses on eating her pretzel. Admittedly, that brief moment in which she'd believed Mike was dating someone else had given her quite the scare. A hot surge of jealousy had sliced her in the gut like a stab wound, and even now that El's simmered down, she finds herself still a little annoyed, because *no way* could Mike date someone else, that would be the *worse thing ever*.

Thankfully, Max drops the subject, and the rest of the night passes by without much event.

By the time 10:00 rolls around, the boys' arms are tired, the girls are stuffed with soft pretzels, and Lucas is still the bowling champion. The band heads out to the dark parking lot, where Steve's BMW parked.

"Well, this was fun," Dustin says with a small wave.

"Later, Henderson," Max waves back.

"Nighty night, Dusty!" Lucas croons, causing Dustin to flip him off.

Dustin heads towards Steve's car as Max and Lucas bid everyone else goodbye and depart for Max's white van. Moments later, a green Pinto pulls into the lot and Will turns to wave to Mike and El.

"There's my mom," He announces, "I'll see you guys Monday!"

"Bye!" Mike and El reply together.

There's a bashful moment of silence as Mike and El realize they're the

only two people left. Not that either of them really mind this, but both are a little unsure of what they should say or do around the other.

"Is someone coming to get you?" Mike asks, glancing at El shyly.

"My dad," El answers, fingering the hem of her jacket, "He gets out of work at 11:00."

"11?" Mike exclaims, "That's like, in an hour!"

El shrugs. "I'll be fine. I can just hang out at the concessions booth inside."

Mike shakes his head. "Screw that," he says dismissively, "You can't wait here for an hour! I'll just drive you home."

El's eyes light up excitedly. "Really?"

"Yeah!" Mike nods, then pauses, "I mean, only if you want to."

"I want to!" El replies eagerly. She probably sounds way too excited, but whatever. If it gets her more alone time with Mike, then she doesn't really care.

As this is happening, Dustin is entering Steve's car. There's a Queen song on the radio, the seats smell like leather and pine, and Steve is drumming his fingers on the steering wheel as he sings along.

"Hey, kid," Steve says, pausing his singing to greet Dustin.

"Hey!" Dustin smiles, buckling himself into his seat.

"So, how was the bowling thing?"

"It was awesome!" Dustin grins, "Will and I had a contest to see who could throw it the worst — he won by lying on his stomach and pushing it forward with his nose."

"Isn't that like, the exact opposite of what you're supposed to do?"

"Duh! That's the point!"

Though Steve's brow furrows in confusion, he still smiles at Dustin.

"You guys are so weird," he teases

"You're mom's weird!" Dustin teases back.

"My mom is great," Steve replies somewhat distractedly. His gaze has moved away from Dustin and is currently trained on the entrance of the bowling alley. His eyes narrow as he examines something with a vague interest.

"So, Wheeler's got a girlfriend now?" Steve asks after a moment, sounding bemused.

Dustin frowns in confusion. "Nancy has a girlfriend? I thought she was with Jonathan?"

Steve turns to give him an incredulous stare. "Not Nancy, dipshit. Mike. The one literally standing right over there."

Steve points back to the front of the bowling alley, where Mike and El are standing close together, conversing amiably.

"What? No! They're not dating!" Dustin frowns as he watches them, "She's not his girlfriend!"

Steve and Dustin watch as Mike proceeds to lead El away from the bowling alley and towards his car. He rushes to hold the passenger's door open for El and she enters, giving him an affectionate smile as she takes her seat.

"You might wanna tell Mike that, then," Steve snorts, watching the exchange.

"Mike promised he wouldn't like her," Dustin grouses.

"Who even is she?"

"El. She's our new lead singer."

"Oh," Steve replies nonchalantly, "Nice."

Dustin eyes him warily. "*Nice?*"

"You guys needed a lead singer," Steve shrugs, eyeing him right back.

"No, we don't!" Dustin snaps, feeling betrayed. Why did *everyone* have to sing El's praises? Could just *one* person be on his side in this?

"Oh, okay, you're right, you don't," Steve replies dryly, "When you start playing shows, you're just gonna play songs with no words and stare at the audience like a bunch of creepy dipshits, 'cause that's a good plan."

"You don't get it," Dustin grumbles, slouching back in the passenger's seat.

"I don't think you get what a band is," Steve counters, turning his key in the car's ignition.

As Steve starts up his vehicle, Mike's car pulls out of the parking lot. Dustin watches forlornly; an uneasy feeling churning in his gut.

It's the same uneasy feeling he got when Lucas and Max started dating, when Steve first moved away to college, when he started to realize that he's probably going to be the last of his friends to get a girlfriend (or, in Will's case, a boyfriend).

It's the inescapable, suffocating fear of being left behind.

The drive to El's house doesn't take long. When Mike pulls his car to a stop in her driveway, he finds himself almost upset about this. Even though he's literally going to see her Monday, he's already starting to miss spending time with her.

El gives a small sigh as she turns to look at him. "Thank you."

"Yeah, you're welcome!" Mike replies, fidgeting with the steering wheel.

"This was better than driving with my dad," El jokes, "And way better than taking the school bus."

"Oh, don't get me started," Mike smiles, rolling his eyes, "I tried riding the bus once, and never did it again. Everyone is so loud and

obnoxious."

"They are!" El giggles, "Yesterday, on the way home from school, these two kids started throwing milk cartons at each other. One of the cartons smacked against the window and broke and chocolate milk got everywhere!"

Mike scrunches up his nose. "That sounds disgusting."

"It was!" El nods, "The bus driver was really mad."

A beat of silence passes as Mike dwells over El's words. An idea dawns on him, but he's not sure if he should share it. He doesn't want to seem weird, or anything...

...But his need to spend more time with her greatly overpowers his desire to not seem like a dweeb.

"You know," Mike offers quickly, before he can lose his nerve, "If you're tired of taking the bus every day, I could drive you to school."

"Mike," El softens, "No, that's okay. I don't want you to go through the trouble."

"It wouldn't be any trouble," Mike replies with a shrug, "Your house isn't that far, and when we have guitar lessons on Thursdays, we could just leave together. It'd be way easier."

"You have a point," El admits.

"So...is that a yes?" Mike asks, sounding shamelessly eager.

As El takes in his hopeful, hesitant smile, she feels her heart warm. God, he really is adorable.

She wants to say yes, she really does, but—

But there's a bitter feeling lurking in the corners of her mind, leaving a bad taste in her mouth. Guilt and reluctance weigh her down, causing her heart to sink and her shoulders to slump.

"You've done so much for me already," El mumbles, averting her gaze

to the gear shift, "You let me join the band, you're giving me lessons, you gave me your guitar, you drove me home..."

"Because that's all stuff that I wanted to do!" Mike protests.

"But I don't want to be a burden!" El frets, wringing her hands.

"You're not a burden, El," Mike insists, "I'm...I like doing these things with you. I like—"

His voice comes to a stop. El quickly raises her head to meet his gaze. Despite how dark the night is, the street lamps give enough light for El to see that he's currently blushing like crazy.

"You like?" El prompts hopefully.

(Me, her heart pleads.)

"I like spending time with you, okay?" Mike replies bashfully, "And I'm happy you moved here."

(That works too.)

"I'm happy I moved here, too," El murmurs back, giving him a soft smile.

Mike smiles back. Even though it's like, the middle of the night, he finds himself thinking about how looking at El feels like looking at the sun. She's bright and shining and makes him feel warm. Plus, he probably looks like a total idiot when he's looking at her.

"So, uh, y-yeah," he stammers helplessly, turning to look out the front windshield instead, "All I'm saying is, I wouldn't mind giving you rides. In my car, I mean, not like...uh...anything else. I mean, cause like...y-you know, that'd be kinda weird. But like, us hanging out more wouldn't have to be weird. It could be fun, I think, but like, only if you wanted to. I mean, Lucas and Max drive around together —"

"You think we're like Lucas and Max?" El grins.

"No!" Mike bursts, "I mean, we could be, kind of. I was just saying

that it's not weird the Max gives Lucas rides, since they're dating. Not that you and I are, or will, or whatever, but we could like...uh...you know...I...I don't know what I'm even saying anymore..."

El's smile widens as he continues to stumble over his words. It's so cute, the way he's rambling and blushing like crazy. It's so cute that El finds herself fighting back every instinct to not lean in and kiss him.

Then again...

Fighting back instinct seemed pretty overrated, anyway.

Without giving it a second thought, El leans in to give Mike a quick kiss on his cheek. She holds the kiss for a fleeting second before pulling back, leaving behind a faint lip gloss print.

That shuts him up.

Mike stops mid-ramble. His eyes are wide, his mouth is kind of hanging open, and he's sitting perfectly still.

Okay, so...*holy shit*, that actually just happened.

Mike, thoroughly shocked, turns to look at El and is pleasantly surprised to see that she's already smiling back at him.

"You can pick me up Monday morning," She instructs, unbuckling her seatbelt.

Mike beams at her, completely starry-eyed, "Okay!" He replies eagerly.

El gives him one last knowing look before exiting his car. As she walks up the front steps toward her house, Mike carefully raises a hand to touch the spot where she kissed him. His skin almost feels like it's buzzing, or perhaps tingling is a better word. Either way, it feels amazing. *El's* amazing.

Monday morning can't come soon enough.

[A/N]: Sorry about the wait on this update! Life had been a little hectic lately!

Thanks again for reading and leaving comments! Even if I can't manage to reply to everyone, I just want you to know that they're greatly appreciated. I read each and every one like, a million times over.

Also, shockingly, I've created a playlist for this fic! It features songs that both inspired the story and that are actually featured within the story. I'll be updating it as the fic continues! You can find the link in my bio!

4. Where Max and El Go to the Mall

"We need a name," El states.

The declaration takes the others by surprise. To be fair, it is rather unexpected. The band is lounging around in Mike's garage, hovering in that awkward in-between period after band practice ends but before everyone starts going home.

El is seated beside Mike on the couch. Mike is idly strumming his guitar, Lucas and Max are seated on the floor practicing AC/DC's *Back in Black*, and Dustin and Will are seated in front of their instruments and looking a little tired. At El's declaration, everyone stops what they're doing to eye her.

"What do you mean?" Lucas asks.

"We need a name for our band," El clarifies.

The other band members glance at each other warily. Evidently, her suggestion is as well-received as if she'd just prompted them to finish their homework or, as Ted Wheeler would put it, 'keep it down in here.'

"I mean, I guess we do," Mike admits after a moment of hesitation.

"We just never agreed on one," Max finishes.

"Don't you have *any* ideas?" El queries hopefully.

"The Demodogs!" Dustin pipes up eagerly. He straightens up so suddenly that his drumsticks accidentally smash against the cymbals, accenting his declaration with an echoing *CRASH*.

"We're *not* going to be named the Demodogs!" Max snaps, covering her ears instinctively.

"What's a Demodog?" El frowns.

"It's his custom D&D monster," Lucas explains.

"From when we used to play Dungeons and Dragons," Mike adds.

"Used to?" Max snorts, "You dweebs still do!"

"Like, a while ago!" Mike blusters.

"Like, three weeks ago!" Max counters.

"Whatever!" Dustin cuts in, "My point is, the Demodogs would be an awesome band name!"

"It'd make us sound like a band of geeks!" Max scoffs.

"Isn't that what we are?" Will jokes.

"So what if it makes us sound like geeks?" Dustin continues, folding his arms as he eyes Max, "It's still better than *your* idea."

El turns to look at Max. "What's your idea?"

Max grins at El in a manner that can only be described as diabolical. "Max and the Maxettes," she replies, unable to keep a straight face.

El bursts into giggles so enthusiastic, she nearly topples right off the couch. Mike has to quickly reach out and grab her arm in order to keep her upright. He notices that after he does this, El casually slides a little closer to him, even after Mike's let go of her.

"It's mental!" Dustin remarks, eyeing El wryly.

"It's awesome!" Max beams.

"It's not so bad," Lucas offers hesitantly.

"Right," Will smiles, giving Lucas a knowing look.

Mike isn't convinced. El notices the way his leg starts to drum against the floor — a clear sign that he's not feeling comfortable.

"It's kind of dumb. Why would we even name our band after you?" Mike frowns, "When *I'm*—"

"You're what?" Max interrupts, raising an eyebrow at Mike.

An abrupt silence settles over the garage as everyone turns to look at Mike. Lucas and Max are eyeing him accusingly, but everyone else just looks hesitantly curious.

Two bright splotches of red bloom on Mike's cheeks as he quickly deflates. "When I'm...I...uh...think the name should be more...inclusive."

"Right," Lucas mutters, turning his gaze away.

Dustin glances between the pair of them, taking the awkward silence as his cue to leave. Things are getting way too tense in here, and he doesn't like where this is headed.

"Well!" Dustin says as cheerily as possible, "I think we should call it a night!"

"Me too!" Will nods, rising up from his keyboard hastily, "It's getting late."

The rest of the band agrees with a series of nods and mumbled affirmations. One by one, they pack up their instruments, don their jackets, and get ready to leave.

As El zippers up her jacket, Mike approaches her with a soft smile. "I can drive you home," he offers chivalrously.

It's kind of a silly offer to make since he'd driven her to school yesterday morning, this morning, and to band practice after school, but they're both still new to the whole carpool-thing. Mike isn't quite ready to just *assume* that El's going to be traveling with him everywhere — not yet, anyway.

"Okay!" El smiles back, "Thank you!"

Their eyes meet, and there's something about the look that passes between them that leaves Dustin feeling a little uneasy. It's like they're both in on an inside joke he doesn't understand.

Maybe it's the left-behind feeling rising up his throat. Maybe it's the way Steve just assumed Mike and El were a couple. Maybe it's the way they're apparently driving around together now, or the way Mike

places his hand on El's back as he starts to guide her out of the garage.

Whatever it is, Dustin knows he needs to talk to Mike, just to make sure that what he thinks is happening isn't happening.

"Hey, Mike!" He calls out at their retreating backs.

Mike stops mid-step and turns to glance back at Dustin. "Yeah?"

"Can I talk with you for a sec?" Dustin asks.

Mike looks a little puzzled, but nods. "I guess so."

Dustin leads Mike into a corner of the garage away from the others, who are chatting near the doorway.

"What's going on?" Mike asks, keeping his voice low.

Dustin hesitates, suddenly feeling very flustered. "I...uh...I just wanted to ask you something."

"Okay?"

Dustin takes a deep breath before blurting it out. "Do you like El?" He asks with as much authority as he can muster.

Mike shrugs. "Obviously — we're friends."

"You know what I mean, Mike," Dustin huffs, "Like, do you *like-like* her?"

As Mike begins to shift in place, Dustin can't help but notice the way he anxiously glances from side-to-side.

"What?" Mike says, voice a little higher than usual.

"Because it's just that we agreed it wouldn't be a good idea," Dustin explains hastily, "Because we don't really know her, and if you guys broke up it'd be really awkward, and...and you said you weren't going to like or date her..."

His voice trails off weakly towards the end, but Dustin can't help it.

The more he talks, the more his throat starts to dry up, the more words like 'alone,' 'forgotten,' and 'last one!' start to buzz around his head like a bunch of annoying flies.

"I don't like-like her!" Mike insists hastily, "We're just friends, I promise!"

Dustin feels a weight lift off his shoulders. He finds that he was holding his breath as he waited for Mike's reply, and consequently breathes out a small sigh of relief. "Okay, cool."

"Yeah, cool," Mike replies, glancing at his feet.

In Mike's defense, what he said isn't completely a lie. While he might like El more than a friend, he's not planning on dating her. He's not sure if El even wants to. All of their guitar lessons have been pretty uneventful. Even now that Mike's driving her to school, their rides don't consist of anything past a 'good morning' and singing along to the radio together. It's nothing like their almost-kiss or El's kiss on the cheek — it's all just-friends stuff.

Girls are so confusing, Mike thinks with a frown.

Dustin wishes Mike goodnight before heading off to bike home. Will leaves with Dustin, since Joyce is evidently still stuck at work and doesn't want Will biking home on his own. Moments later, Lucas and Max opt to head out, too, leaving Mike and El alone.

Again.

Mike returns to El's side, hoping to avoid her skeptical gaze.

"What were you and Dustin talking about?" El asks.

"Oh, you know," Mike shrugs, "Stuff."

El snorts. "That's descriptive."

"I know," Mike teases.

El rolls her eyes playfully. She's becoming aware of the fact that they're alone together, which sends her into a *mood*. A mood where

she just wants to kiss him like she had in the car, where she wants to just be as close to him as possible, where she kind of feels lightheaded and weightless around him.

It's kind of embarrassing, really, that just Mike *standing there* has this effect on her, but whatever.

She sequesters her feelings by hugging Mike's arm and guiding him toward the door. "Let's go," she pleads, "You're slow."

"Slow?!" Mike smiles disbelievingly.

"Yes," El nods, still hugging his arm, "Like a slow turtle."

"That's descriptive," Mike mimics in a high-pitched voice, and though it earns him a nudge, El doesn't let go of him.

Mike leads her outside to his car. As he puts the key in the ignition, the radio turns on, El starts singing along, and Mike is once again reminded of just how adorable she is —

— he realizes he's a total liar. He totally wants to date El. He wants to be able to drive her home every night, he wants to be able to bundle her in his arms, curl his fingers into her sweaters, and bury his nose into her rose-scented hair.

El digs into her bag and pulls out a tube of cherry chapstick. As she runs it across her lips, she turns to glance at Mike worriedly. "Is everything okay?"

Mike straightens up quickly, forcing his gaze away from her lips. "Yeah! Everything's great!"

He's not sure whether that's a lie or not.

On Friday night, El gets a phone call. Since there's only one phone in the house, she has to run over to the hallway near the kitchen to answer it.

"If it's that Mike kid, tell him I wanna talk to him," Hopper says from the living room couch.

El throws him a look over her shoulder as she picks up the receiver.
"That's not happening."

Hopper only smiles wryly as El raises the receiver to her ear and greets, "Hello?"

"Hey, El!" Max replies, "How's it going?"

"Max!" El brightens, "I'm doing good!"

"Max?" Hopper remarks skeptically.

"*Maxine*," El huffs, covering the receiver with her hand, "She's a girl."

"Oh."

El gives her dad an exasperated look before bringing her finger up to her lips and making a '*shh*' signal. When Hopper only raises his hands in self-defense, El finally returns her focus to the phone call.

"So, anyway," Max is saying, "The boys never want to do 'girly' stuff with me, since they're a bunch of assholes, and going with my mom is super lame, so I just wanted to know if you wanted to go together?"

El blanches, utterly confused. "Go where?"

"To the mall?"

"Oh," El says, relieved. Then the invitation seems to reach a new level of understanding because she feels excitement bubble up in her like sparkling water. "Oh!" She repeats, more eagerly.

"I was thinking we could go tomorrow?" Max offers, "If you're not doing anything."

"You know I'm not," El jokes.

"Well, I still thought I'd ask!" Max exclaims defensively, "Like, I didn't know if you and Mike had some kind of sucking-face-fest planned or something."

El's so incredibly grateful that Max can't see how red her cheeks are

right now. "We don't!" She replies, flustered.

"Shit, you're right! Those are Thursdays, aren't they?"

"Max!"

"I'm kidding!" Max insists, "...Mostly. Anyway, I'll pick you up at like, 11 or 12 tomorrow."

"Alright!" El nods. She rattles off her address to Max before the girls exchange goodbyes and end the call. El proceeds to wander into the living room, feeling somehow both bored and anxiously excited at the same time.

Hopper is seated on the couch, reviewing some old case files as *Wheel of Fortune* plays on the TV. As El enters, he turns to look at her expectantly. "So, you're going out tomorrow?"

"Yes," El nods, leaning against the wall as she glances at the TV, "Max wants to go to the mall."

"I guess you're just little Miss Popular now, huh?" Hopper says with a teasing smirk.

Though El rolls her eyes, she can't stop a telltale smile from curving her lips. "I have five friends — I'm not popular."

Hopper gives a conceding shrug and returns his attention back to his files. "Well," he says gruffly, "I'm glad you're making some friends, kid."

It's hard for El to think back to their days in Chicago, to the days spent alone in her room, alone in the lunchroom, alone in the classrooms, alone *everywhere*, really. Though she's only known the band for a little less than a month, she can't imagine what it'd be like to not eat lunch with them every day, to not spend every Tuesday in Mike's garage, to not have someone to wave at when they passed each other in the hallways. It sounds cheesy, but she feels like their friendship is making her complete somehow.

Thinking about this, she knows that she's just as happy as her dad is about the whole situation. She considers telling him all this, but

instead what winds up coming out is, "The answer is *playing electric guitar*."

Hopper throws her a bewildered, questioning look. "What?"

El motions to the TV, where Vanna White is standing in front of a board of scrambled letters. "The answer to the show," she clarifies.

Seconds later, a contestant shouts out the answer and El is proven to be right.

"Huh," Hopper replies, sounding mildly impressed, "How'd you know that?"

"Guitar lessons," El replies with a playful smile.

Hopper gives a grunt in a response that's neither approving or disapproving as he returns to his case files.

El continues to smile as she returns to her room, eager for tomorrow's activities.

It feels like it takes forever, but Saturday morning eventually arrives, and around 11:30, Max and her big white van are parked outside El's flat. Thankfully, Hopper's already left for the station, otherwise El knows he would have had some kind of teasing comment to make about it.

El hurries outside and boards the passenger's seat. Max is seated behind the wheel, drumming her fingers against the dashboard as some classic rock plays over the radio.

"Hey, El!" She greets as El buckles herself in.

"Hi, Max!" El beams back. She glances around the van curiously, taking in all the sights. There's a tiny tree-shaped air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror that leaves the van smelling citrusy. When El looks behind her, she's shocked to see that the van has no back seats at all — just a big, empty space.

"That's where we keep the instruments," Max explains as she eyes El's surprised look, "You know, when we're on the road. Also, it's where

creeps would put all the dead bodies, so that's kinda cool."

El gives a laugh that sounds both amused and a little alarmed.

"I'm kidding!" Max assures her, "I'm pretty sure no one's been murdered in here."

"Oh!" El relaxes.

Max gives El a teasing smile as she puts the car into drive and heads off.

"So, where's the mall?" El asks as Max speeds along.

"It's actually in the next town over, like 25 minutes away," Max explains, "Since Hawkins is too shitty and lame to have its own."

"Hawkins isn't that lame," El frowns. Though she hasn't been here long, she feels as if Max is being a little harsh. Sure, Hawkins was small, but that made it seem more...*homey*.

"That's only because you haven't been here long," Max snorts, "Trust me, this place is the worst."

"Why?"

"Because...it's so small. Nothing ever interesting happens around here. Everybody knows everybody and everyone's in everyone's business."

El pauses as she takes a moment to consider this. "Oh," she replies noncommittally.

"I seriously can't wait to get out of Hawkins," Max continues, "I mean, I guess that's why I care about our dweeby band so much."

"Because it'll get you out of Hawkins?" El offers.

"I mean, that's the plan, right?" Max replies, a wistful glint in her eye, "Making an album? Becoming famous? Playing all over the country?"

Deep down, El can't help but question whether their little garage band could ever reach that level of fame. It's a flighty thought for

sure, but if it's what puts Max at ease, El supposes there's no harm in dwelling on it.

"Where would you — *we* — go?" El asks curiously.

"I've always wanted to visit New York!" Max gushes, "Or California! I've heard L.A. is like, totally tubular."

"Totally!" El smiles.

The conversation dies down after that, though afterward Max is noticeably less negative when it comes to talking about Hawkins.

As they drive along, Max starts to point out various landmarks to El like a sarcastic tour guide. There's *Benny's Burgers* (where you can get the most bitching food in town), the Quarry (where you could like, jump to your death or enjoy a scenic view — whichever you prefer), and a lookout point that serves as Lovers' Lane (where all the horny dweebs go to make out).

The drive to the mall goes by quickly, largely because Max is speeding like crazy.

"Speed limits are for suckers," she says as she eyes El's white-knuckled grip on the sides of the passenger's seat.

"Yeah!" El replies shakily.

Despite Max's speeding and distracted chatter, she's actually an excellent driver. She gets the girls to the mall in no time, and not once do they have to make any dangerous maneuvers or worry about almost hitting someone.

Max skids the car to a stop in the parking lot of the mall. The mall isn't terribly impressive — it's only one floor and doesn't house many stores — but by Hawkins' standards, it's basically the fanciest multiplex ever. Max knows she's seen as a tomboy by pretty much everyone, but she'd be lying if she said there's not a part of her that's stupidly happy about getting to spend the day at the mall with another girl. It feels normalizing, somehow, or at least different and exciting.

Max shows El around the mall with the chipper attitude of a real-estate agent. Half of her is hamming it up for El's sake, the other half is just the dweeby side of her that's happy to be here. Either way, El gets a good laugh out of Max's bravado, so it's worth it.

The girls spend most of the day shopping for clothes. Though their fashion styles are distinctly different — Max with her athletic hoodies and graphic t-shirts; El with her brightly colored sweaters and overalls — they still manage to have a great time looking for stuff together. The experience is pretty new for both of them, since El's been pretty much sans-friends all her life, and since whenever Max has tried to take Lucas shopping with her, he suggests that they just grab the first shirt they find and leave.

With El, Max feels free to take all the time she wants. Plus, she's not afraid to ask lame questions like, "Do these jeans make my butt look too big?" or, "Does this blue sweater clash with my hair?"

They're also willing to experiment with new clothing styles, thanks to the playful encouragement they both give each other, which is how Max winds up getting that sky-blue sweater while El purchases a pair of aviator sunglasses that are, in her words, pretty bitchin'.

"I'm glad we got to do this," Max says as she and El wander through the mall together, arms full of various shopping bags.

El's still sporting her new sunglasses, so it's kind of hard to gauge her reaction at first, but then her face brightens with an appreciative smile. "Me too!"

Max is unable to stop herself from snorting. "Why are you wearing your sunglasses inside?"

"They're cool," El pouts.

"I mean, yeah, they are, but—"

Max is cut off as El gasps excitedly.

"There's a bookstore?" El exclaims, moving her glasses up and onto her head so that she can check out the front of the bookstore outlet.

"Uh, yeah?" Max frowns, "Why? You wanna go in?"

El turns to give her a shy smile. "Can we?"

Max shrugs. "Sure?"

El leads the way into the bookstore. At first, she wanders around the aisles aimlessly, like she doesn't know what she's looking for. Then her gaze lands on the Romance section, she makes a beeline towards it, and it's painfully obvious that this is what she was searching for the entire time.

El's eyes light up with excitement as she leads Max to a section of shelves packed to the brim with paperback romance novels.

Max picks up the book that's within her closest reach and eyes it skeptically. It looks exactly like every other book in this section — a cheesy, cursive title, an even cheesier tagline, and a cover illustration of a girl leaning away from a guy that's kissing her neck or hair or ear or whatever.

"You like this kind of stuff?" Max asks, failing to keep the heavy skepticism out of her voice.

El glances over at her, already sorting through an armful of books. "They're interesting," she replies simply.

"They all look the same!" Max smirks, picking up a second book.

"They're very different," El insists.

"This is so dumb!" Max snorts, reading the back of her book, "Listen to this one."

Max clears her throat and proceeds to read the back of her book in an overly-dramatic, seductive sort of voice that causes El to burst into laughter.

"The man she'd loved had ruined her life. I didn't do it!" Lyn had protested, horrified, when accused of drug smuggling. But no one—customs officials or jury—had believed her. And then she discovered that her pilot boyfriend, Beric, had deliberately set her up! Her blind, trusting

love rapidly turned to hate.

After three years in prison, she was determined to be revenged on Beric. So she worked out a complicated plan to get back into his life without his knowing who she was. And it worked. But not quite in the way that Lyn had intended."

By the time Max finishes, El's laughing so hard that she's attracting stares from other shoppers.

"If Lucas tried to set me up for drug smuggling, I'd kick his ass," Max jokes, setting the book aside.

El, still giggling, wipes tears of laughter from her eyes. "Lucas would never do that!"

"True," Max smirks, "He'd probably try it on Mike."

This causes El to fall into another round of laughter so enthusiastic, she nearly drops the books she's holding.

"Mike's pilot boyfriend, Lucas, had deliberately set him up!" El squeals nonsensically.

The volume of Max's laugh takes both girls by surprise, and Max is forced to quickly slap a hand over her own mouth to stop more people from staring.

"O-oh my g-god!" Max exclaims in a wheezing sort of whisper.

They continue to muffle their laughs with their hands until they get ahold of themselves. As their laughs finally die down, El pauses to ask a question that's been lingering around the back of her mind lately.

"Hey, Max?"

"Yeah?" Max asks, sighing as she wipes away her last few tears of laughter.

"Why don't Mike and Lucas get along?" El asks curiously.

Max's smile falters as she hesitates. "What do you mean?"

"It's just," El continues carefully, "Sometimes it seems like they don't like each other. Like, when they talk about who's the lead guitarist, or when they have all those competitions..."

"Oh," Max replies flatly. "Yeah. I know what you mean. I don't think it's that they dislike each other, I think it's just that Mike can be a little insensitive sometimes. It pisses Lucas off."

As El hears this, she feels a defensive sort of bitterness hit her like a kick to the gut. Mike's not insensitive — he never would be! He's the nicest, sweetest boy El's ever met, and hearing Max say negative things about him just doesn't sit well with her.

"Maybe Lucas just doesn't understand," El offers, "Mike's very sensitive."

Max gives a dismissive snort and doesn't say anything more. Though no further words on the issue are exchanged, El's pretty sure they're not in agreement. An uncomfortable tension starts to fester between the girls as they exchange awkward glances and shuffle in place.

El quickly averts her gaze to the pile of books in her arms, desperate for some way to salvage the situation. "Look at this one!" She says, holding up the book at the top of her stack, "The main character's last name is Mayfield!"

"Bullshit!" Max gasps, rushing over to El's side.

"It's true!" El smiles, proceeding to read in her own imitation of Max's dramatic narrator voice, "*Honor Mayfield thought her chance meeting with respected horseman Conn Landry was a stroke of good luck. Too late, Honor realizes she's been set up, and the man she is falling for seeks to avenge a legacy of murder and betrayal. Now, Honor and Conn are tangled together in a dangerous web of deception and desire.*"

"They stole my name!" Max exclaims, snatching the book from El to look at it more closely, "I should sue!"

El giggles. "Sue?"

"Yeah! They're ruining the family name and making us all seem like a bunch of ditzzy imbeciles!"

At that, El's laughter returns in full force. Before long, she and Max are back to cracking up over cheesy romance novels again, all tensions involving Mike and Lucas long forgotten.

Mike's never really thought of himself as a singer, but there's something about driving with El in the passenger's seat that just brings it out of him. El will be flipping through radio stations in search of a song she likes, and once she finds one, she'll start to sing.

It's totally adorable how much she gets into it. Dancing, air-guitars, the whole shebang. While El's normally pretty reserved when they're hanging out with everyone else, when it's just her and Mike, she's not afraid to goof around. When Mike sees all the fun she's having while singing, he can't help but join in, even if he doesn't sound nearly as good as she does.

Today is no different.

It's Thursday evening and the pair is headed back to Mike's house for another guitar lesson, their fourth one so far.

...Not that he's been counting, or anything. He totally doesn't spend his Wednesday night Radio Shack shifts anxiously wondering how practice is going to go, and he definitely doesn't spend his Friday night shifts analyzing every time their fingers brushed or El smiled at him.

That'd be, well, a little crazy.

Almost as crazy as what El says as she and Mike finish belting out *Don't Stop Believin'*

"You're a good singer," El states firmly.

Mike feels the compliment warm him from the inside out. He could swear his insides actually glowed, even though technically that wouldn't be possible. "I'm really not," he replies modestly, keeping his gaze trained on the road.

"You are," El insists, "It sounds pretty."

Mike's never been called 'pretty' before, nor did he ever think he wanted to, but at that second compliment, Mike beams from ear to ear. *Pretty?* El thinks his singing is pretty? This is like, the best news ever.

"Thanks," Mike replies bashfully, "But you're still prettier."

El's breath catches in a soft gasp, and that's when Mike realizes what he just said.

"I mean, your singing is prettier!" Mike quickly amends, white-knuckling the steering wheel, "I was talking about your voice, not anything else! I mean, not that you're *not* pretty, like, otherwise, but...I...I wasn't — "

El has to bite down on her lower lip to keep from laughing. It's always so amusing how flustered he gets over stuff like this. "Mike, it's okay," she assures him, "I understand."

Mike throws her a sheepish glance. "You do?"

El smiles and offers him a nod, which seems to put Mike at ease. His shoulders slump with relief as he returns his focus to the road.

Moments later, they arrive at the Wheeler's. Mike parks the car in the driveway and El reaches into the backseat to grab her Stratocaster which, much like herself, has basically been living in Mike's car as of late.

"I've been practicing *Blackbird* at home!" El eagerly reports as she and Mike walk towards the garage together, "I almost have it completely memorized!"

Mike beams proudly. "That's great, El! You know that you're like, crazy talented, right?"

El holds her guitar closer to herself and grins. A compliment from Mike was enough to leave her feeling dizzy in the best of ways. "Thank you," she replies politely.

"Maybe I'm going to have some competition as the lead guitarist," Mike jokes.

El rolls her eyes. "I think I'll stick to singing."

There's a door that leads from the outside of the house to inside the garage, so Mike brings the pair to a stop in front of it and uses his house keys to grant them access.

No cutting through the living room, El briefly thinks as she and Mike step inside the garage.

"Are your parents home?" El asks.

"Maybe, I dunno," Mike replies disinterestedly, "Why?"

El shrugs.

"Well, I saw their cars outside, so I guess they're here," Mike remarks as he turns on the garage lights and moves to grab his guitar, "But they shouldn't bother us."

"Okay," El replies.

Mike tunes up his guitar before he leads El over to the couch. Since this is their fourth lesson now, they know the drill. Mike walks her through a couple warm-up chords, El shows him what she's practiced since their last lesson, and then Mike offers further instruction.

The first couple hours of their lesson pass by smoothly. Everything's going just as usual —

Until it's not.

Mike is walking El through an intermediate chord when one of the strings on El's guitar snaps. It breaks off from the guitar with the suddenness and resulting pain of a cracking whip, causing El to grimace as the string strikes her fingers.

Mike hears this before he sees it, but El's hitched gasp and the abrupt stop to her playing is enough to get his attention quickly enough. He looks over just in time to see El drop her guitar into her lap and

clutch at her hand.

"Shit!" Mike exclaims, setting his own guitar aside.

"I'm sorry!" El frets, glancing down at her guitar, "I didn't mean to do that!"

"It's okay!" Mike assures her, "It's not your fault. I've been meaning to sand down the bridge on that one."

"Oh," El replies lamely.

Mike nods before reaching forward to grab her hand that was lashed at by the broken guitar string. As he examines it, El feels heat course through her fingers like liquid fire, or electricity, or...heartbeats. It sounds ridiculous, but whenever Mike touches her, it's as if he leaves a heartbeat behind. She can feel her skin tingling and nerves pulsating erratically. Perhaps it's just all the blood flow rushing to where his hands are, furiously working to fight off the light-headed, dream-like daze Mike always manages to lure her into.

"You're not hurt, are you, El?" Mike asks concernedly.

"No!" El answers quickly, "I'm good! It's just sore!"

"Okay, good," Mike replies with relief as he gently sets her hand down, "I'm pretty sure I have some extra guitar strings in my room, plus a file to sand that bridge down so it doesn't snap any more of your strings."

"Okay?" El smiles hesitantly. As much as her guitar skills have improved, whenever Mike gets a little technical, it's still a load of nonsense words to her. Bridge? As in, the bridge of a song? File? Like a nail file?

Despite her confusion, she does her best not to let it show. She gives Mike a cheery smile as he exits the garage to get the supplies from his room.

As she waits alone, she becomes aware of how much time has passed. It's already almost 6:30 — sunset's going to be fairly soon. Then there's the second thing El becomes aware of, the thing that had

previously been masked by the sounds of Mike and El strumming away.

Voices. They're muffled in dictation, but distinct in volume. She can hear them as they filter out from the house and make their way into the garage. Their tones are jarring, brash, and clearly a part of some sort of argument.

El, with a sickly feeling churning in her gut, is pretty sure she knows who the voices belong to.

Moments later, Mike returns. He's gripping a small sandpaper file in one hand and a package of guitar strings in the other. He doesn't look at El — instead, he keeps his gaze trained towards the ground as he quickly rejoins her on the couch.

El tenses, unsure if she should say anything.

"Give me your guitar," Mike instructs, voice uncharacteristically stiff.

El hands it to him.

Mike grabs it from her and gets to work filing down the bridge of the guitar. His face is darkened with an irritated scowl as he sands down the rough edge.

El eyes him cautiously. "Is everything okay?"

The muffled sounds of arguing can still be heard as Mike tosses the file aside and gets to work on replacing the string. He doesn't answer El, but he doesn't manage to fix the string either. Every time he tries to fasten it into place, his hands start to shake and he fumbles.

After several failed attempts, his hands are shaking like crazy and his breathing is becoming increasingly ragged. He keeps trying and trying, growing more and more frustrated, but to no avail.

"Mike!" El exclaims worriedly. She reaches out her hands and places them over his, halting his shaky movements, "What's wrong?"

"S'nothing," Mike replies, voice suddenly taut and hoarse, "I'm fine."

"You're not fine," El says dismissively.

Mike is silent for a moment, and El isn't quite sure if he's figuring out what to say or if he's trying to plan how to say it. Either way, a few moments of miserable silence drag by, leaving Mike's eyes red and shimmering with tears he won't allow to fall.

"My parents started arguing again," he finally admits, "Just now. I mean, they always kind of do, but it's really bad right now. They keep going back and forth and —" His voice falters, wavers, "—I'm sorry you had to hear them."

El glances towards the wall where the muffled shouts can still be heard. She almost wants to scoff in disbelief, because there's no way Mike's *apologizing* to *her* for his parents fighting. That's backward in every possible sense.

"Don't say sorry," El instructs, brushing her thumbs over his hands, "It's not your fault."

Mike nods noncommittally before falling back into another quiet stupor. El continues to hold his hands, doing her best to provide any support she can. As they sit in silence, the muffled discourse eventually fizzles out like a wet sparkler, leaving Mike and El surrounded by their own silence.

"Don't you just ever wish that you could be somewhere else?" Mike mumbles after a bit, "Just for like...a day? Or even a couple hours?" His eyes are less watery-looking, but his voice is still strained and he refuses to make eye contact with her.

El thinks back to how she felt during those long days before Hawkins, before she had friends to turn to. "Yes," she murmurs.

As Mike continues to look down at his feet, El feels herself become emboldened with the urge to protect him. She hates seeing him like this, and she refuses to let him feel sad for a second longer.

Mike continues to mope and is startled when El moves forward and carefully takes the guitar out of his hands. She sets it aside on the couch, turning to look back at him with a determined glint in her

eye.

Mike frowns in bewilderment as El inches closer to him. "What are you doing?"

"I want to help," El says simply.

And that's when she sticks her hand down his pants.

Okay — not like *that*. But she does slip her hand into the pocket of his jeans and retrieve his car keys. Despite the innocent nature of the action, Mike still yelps and blushes like an idiot anyways.

Without so much as a semblance of an explanation, El grabs the keys, rises to her feet, and motions for Mike to follow her.

"What are you doing?" Mike asks again, still flustered as El presses the button that opens the garage door.

"Let's go," El instructs.

"Go? Where?"

"Out."

"What about our lesson?"

El gives him a flat stare. "You're upset, I can tell."

"I'll be fine, I'm pretty much used to it by now," Mike mutters.

"You shouldn't have to be," El frowns.

Mike gives a dismal shrug in response.

"You said you wanted to be somewhere else," El reminds him. She crosses the room and stops in front of the couch, using both hands to pull Mike to his feet, "So, let's go somewhere else."

Mike finally allows himself to meet her gaze. As he looks down at her standing before him, her eyes are filled with nothing but warmth, she's giving him a reassuring smile — like *everything's going to be okay* — and...

...Well, shit. It *does* something.

Mike gives her a tiny smile and nods. "Okay," he replies thickly, wiping at his eyes.

El's smile brightens as she releases his hands and begins to lead the way out of the garage. Mike makes sure to shut the door behind them as they leave, his curiosity piquing considerably as they head to his car.

El unlocks the vehicle and hops right into the driver's seat without a second thought.

Mike's eyebrows shoot upwards toward his hairline as he sits down in the passenger's seat. His somber demeanor is quickly replaced with shocked curiosity as El prepares to drive his car. "I thought you didn't have your license!"

"I don't," El shrugs, buckling herself in.

"Do you even know how to drive?" Mike exclaims, following her action.

"A little," El shrugs again, slipping the keys into the ignition, "I've practiced with my dad."

Mike doesn't know whether to feel shocked, defensive, awed, or a combination of all of the above. He only winds up blinking at her, clearly baffled and looking like a wastoid.

"You're gonna get us in so much trouble!" He finally manages to say.

"My dad's the chief of police," El reminds him with a smirk.

She's crazy, but also completely incredible. Mike thinks he might love her.

The latter thought flashes through his mind as abruptly as a streak of lightning. Love her? No, he can't love her. He's never been in love with anyone, and he's pretty sure it takes longer than a month to fall in love with someone.

And yet...

When El starts pulling the car out of the driveway with a mischievous glint in her eye, when she turns on the radio and starts humming along, when she takes her eyes off the road just to throw Mike a quick, affectionate grin, Mike's heart continues to whisper the "L" word to him like a secret it's been keeping.

Love, love, love. You're falling in love.

The thought is both terrifying and exhilarating at the same time, and all Mike's left to do is just sit back and literally enjoy the ride.

As El continues to drive, she glances around the streets curiously. To be completely honest, she has no clue where she's going. Not only because she doesn't know Hawkins that well, but also because the sun has set and everything is dark indigo or deep black. It's hard to recognize any streets or familiar places.

Still, she keeps driving. She has to find something — *anything* — to keep Mike's mind off his parents. She'll drive around all night if it'll cheer him up.

Thankfully, it doesn't take all night. After about 10 minutes of cruising through Hawkins, the glow of a particular neon sign catches El's eye.

Yes, this should do.

She pulls into the parking lot, impressed with her own driving abilities. All those times goofing off with her dad in the police cruiser have finally paid off.

Mike glances out the window skeptically. "Why are we at a 7-Eleven?"

"Max said that you guys like coming here for slushies," El replies, hoping she hasn't gotten that fact wrong. It'd be super embarrassing if she'd misheard Max and just driven to a random convenience store.

Thankfully, she hadn't misheard Max. It's at this random convenience store that Mike and his friends have spent so many late nights and

summer afternoons. Whenever they get in a snacky mood, they head here and stick up in potato chips, candy, and an unhealthy amount of Slurpees.

Mike knows it's pretty lame, but he can't stop himself from smiling like an idiot. "Uh, yeah, we do."

"Then let's get some," El smiles, putting the car into park. She takes the car keys and tosses them to Mike before exiting the car.

Mike gets out of the car and follows after her eagerly. This whole night is totally weird so far, but he finds that he's loving every moment of it.

Her, her, her, his heart teases, you're loving her.

Mike brushes the thought aside as they enter the building. El glances around before her gaze lands on the slushie machine in the corner. With a confident stride in her step, she moves right over to it, causing Mike to have to hurry to keep up with her.

The shop is lit with both fluorescent white ceiling lamps and strips of green and red neon lights that line the rim of the ceiling. It leaves Mike and El's faces oddly discolored as they come to a stop in front of the Slurpee machine.

The machine makes a droning whirring sound as it mixes the Slurpees around. As El contemplates the three flavors (cherry, blue raspberry, and Coke), Mike grabs a pair of styrofoam cups for them to use.

"So, what kind are you going to get?" Mike asks, handing her the cup.

El looks up at him curiously. "What kind do you like?"

Mike shrugs. "I think they're all pretty good, but I usually go with Blue Raspberry. It makes your tongue turn all purple!"

El's brow crinkles as she gives him a bemused smile before turning back to the machine. "I think..." she begins slowly, "I'm going to get...all of them."

Mike pauses. "Wait, what?"

Without further ado, El takes one of the cups from his hand and proceeds to fill it with shots from each flavor.

Mike, once again, doesn't know whether to feel alarmed or awed.

"You're crazy!" He finally manages to blurt out, but even as the words leave his mouth, he's smiling.

"You said they were all good!" El shrugs, capping off her creation.

"Yeah, I didn't mean together!"

El only smiles as she sticks a straw into her cup and takes a long sip.

"Ugh, you're so gross," Mike teases.

"It's good!" El smiles, "You should try it."

"No way!"

"Do it!" El encourages, giving him a light nudge, "You'll like it."

Mike's 99% positive he won't, but with the cute smile El's giving him and the way her hand lingers on his arm after she nudges him, he's pretty sure that El could be asking him to jump off a cliff right now and he'd totally swan-dive right off of it.

"Okay!" He complies, "I'll try it."

El cheers as Mike steps forward and fills his cup with all three flavors. The slushie flavors mix together and turn into a peculiar mauve color that's not exactly appetizing, but Mike tries not to dwell on that for too long.

He caps off his drink, slips a straw in it, takes a sip, and —

— It's basically exactly what he'd thought it'd be. All the flavors have just blended together to create an icy flavor of just pure syrupy sugar. He kind of hates it, but he finds himself taking more sips anyway.

"This is awful," he says as he continues to drink the Slurpee.

"It's great!" El contends. She remains nothing but chipper as she grabs his hand and leads him up to the cash register.

As Mike digs out his wallet to pay, disregarding El's pouty protests that she can pay since it was her idea, she continues to hold his hand.

Something about it just feels so right — being out and about, holding hands, Mike paying for them. It's almost like...well, a date.

Mike knows it's technically not since he didn't ask her or anything, but he's still overcome with the desire to make this the best sort-of-a-date that El's ever had.

After paying for their Slurpees, Mike leads them back to his car, choosing to get behind the driver's wheel this time.

"Let's blow this popsicle stand," Mike jokes as El gets into the passenger's seat and he starts the car.

"*Slushie* stand," El playfully corrects.

Mike sticks out his tongue at her teasingly, which causes El to crack up.

"You're tongue is already purple!" She gleefully points out.

"So is yours!" Mike counters with a grin.

El sticks out her tongue and cranes her neck to check out her reflection in the rear-view mirror. "It is!" She exclaims giddily.

Mike fights back the urge to kiss her right then and there. The desire to capture her lips in his, to slip her tongue right into his mouth, is so overwhelming and sudden it nearly knocks the wind out of him.

He feels his face flame in a hot blush at the audacity of his own thoughts, and he has to force himself to stare out the dashboard as he pulls out of the parking lot. He seriously needs to chill out.

Thank god he's got the terrible slushie.

Keeping one hand on the steering wheel, he grabs his cup and takes a

long sip, relishing its icy cooling effect.

"So, where are we going?" El asks as Mike continues to drive. She looks out the window as she poses her question, distracted by the dramatic shadows Mike's headlights cast against the trees.

"Ummm," Mike hesitates, setting his drink back down, "...Somewhere."

El has a feeling he's in the same position she was earlier — aimlessly searching for someplace to go. She doesn't mind though — the more time she gets to spend with Mike, the better.

They drive through the dark for about 15 minutes before Mike finally finds a place to stop.

The lookout point.

Aka, Lovers' Lane.

Aka, where horny dweebs go to make out.

El feels her heartbeat speed up as Mike pulls the car to a stop. He turns off the engine but keeps the ignition turned on, allowing for the heat to continue to flow and the radio to still play.

"Why did you want to come here?" El asks casually, hoping she's not smiling too much.

"Oh, you know," Mike replies just as casually, "I just thought it'd be nice to find a quiet space."

"At Lovers' Lane?" El giggles, unable to help herself.

Despite how dark it is, Mike's blush could be visible from miles away. "Y-you know about Lovers' Lane?" He stammers.

"I'm new, not stupid," El replies lightly, "Max told me."

"Oh," Mike flushes, "Well...I...I didn't bring us here for that. I just...I wanted to get away from everything for awhile. Plus, it's really pretty out here."

"It is," El nods as she looks out the window. The lookout point is a large cliff top that overlooks a large valley. There's a fence that guards the edge, but beyond that, there's nothing but sprawling trees. As they're now well into October, the trees are awash with reds, oranges, and yellows. Though the sun is a mere sliver of light on the dark horizon, it's enough to illuminate the fantastic view so El can enjoy it.

The radio continues to play some classic rock love songs as Mike and El sit. While they're able to enjoy the scenic view, they also find themselves racking their brains for something to say.

Mike finally breaks the silence with a tentative mumble. "Thanks for spending time with me."

El turns to look at him, puzzled. "What?"

"You know," Mike shrugs, "Just...going out for slushies, and coming here, and just...being with me."

El gazes at him softly. Though his words are kind and affectionate, there's no mistaking the somber edge to his voice. He's clearly still brooding on what happened with his parents, even though El suspects he doesn't want to.

El can't help but question whether Mike even has anyone to discuss his parental problems with. As far as she knows, it's not something that the rest of the band members have ever mentioned.

Do they even know? El wonders concernedly. Regardless, she instantly takes it upon herself to be someone Mike can confide in. She wants him to know that she cares, that she's here for him.

"C'mon," El instructs, unbuckling her seatbelt, "Let's talk."

Mike's brow furrows. "What?"

"We should talk," El reiterates. She grabs her Slurpee cup in one hand and proceeds to climb over the gearshift and make her way to the back of Mike's car. It takes a little bit of awkward maneuvering, but she finally takes her seat in the far more spacious backseat.

"Come here," she instructs, patting the seat beside her.

"Why back there?"

"It's less awkward," El answers, motioning to the gearshift and dashboard.

"I guess you're right," Mike complies, and with that, he's taking his drink and awkwardly trying to move into the backseat.

He's so tall and lanky that his limbs have to bend and stretch at odd angles in order for him to climb over the gearshift and squeeze past the two front seats, but he somehow manages to make it work. Once Mike's settled, the two sit facing each other, knees propped up on the seat and backs resting against the side doors of the car. As El looks at Mike seated across from her, she rests the back of her head against the cool glass of the window.

Mike chews on his bottom lip and eyes her somewhat nervously. "So...uh...what did you wanna talk about?"

"You're still upset," El replies simply, "You should let it out."

Mike gives a huffy sigh in reply, ready to rattle off another excuse. "I told you, El, I'm fine. This kind of stuff happens all the time, and—"

"Mike," El cuts off, voice eerily cold. She's clearly not having any of his wishy-washy deflections.

Mike's voice comes to a faltering stop. Before he can stop himself, his mind takes him back to the living room earlier tonight, when he'd unknowingly walked into yet another one of his parents' arguments.

Thank god Holly was probably already in bed when it happened.

But that's what just kills him. He knows that there are times when his little sister hasn't been lucky enough to be asleep, when he's had to desperately do his best to distract her from all the noise. It was easier when Nancy was still here, but now that things are getting increasingly worse and his older sister is gone, Mike just doesn't know how to keep up anymore.

So much for this being the best sort-of-date ever.

"This kind of stuff happens all the time," Mike repeats, only this time his tone isn't flippant, but overwhelmed with exhaustion, "It used to just be once in awhile, but now it's practically once a week. Sometimes more."

Mike's gaze is distant and unfocused as he speaks, as if his mind is completely lost in some other place. El feels her eyes start to smart as she looks at him worriedly.

"I'm just so tired of it," Mike continues, grasping his styrofoam cup tightly, "I just wish they'd stop. But I'm worried...I'm worried that stopping means they're gonna split up, like, for good. I don't want our family to be all screwed up, but I don't want them to keep fighting, either."

As he processes his own words, he realizes that he's probably not making much sense. "I don't know," he adds lamely, voice laden with an embarrassed, somber weight, "It's hard to explain."

"No, I understand," El murmurs in reply, "I've felt the same way."

Mike glances up at her in startled surprise. "You have?"

Here we go.

El's spent so much time trying to not think about her mother that thinking of her turns out to be a tremendously strenuous effort. She finds herself growing physically tired as she puts herself back in those times that were so terribly similar to Mike's.

El digs her nails into the foam Slurpee cup, idly picking away at it as she starts to talk. "My Mom is...gone."

"Gone?" Mike frowns.

"She walked out," El clarifies, and *shit*, why is her voice suddenly so hoarse? She shouldn't be upset about this, she shouldn't even care about this terrible person. "She left me and my dad and she's not coming back. She doesn't care."

Mike looks at her remorsefully. "I'm sorry."

El shrugs, flicking flecks of styrofoam off her fingers, "It's okay. It happened a couple years ago. My dad is better without her."

Mike isn't quite sure how he should reply to that, so he settles for a brief nod.

A bitter silence settles over the pair, and for several moments the only sounds to be heard are the faint blowing of heat through the car vents and the soft music playing over the radio.

Mike keeps turning El's sentence over in his mind: *My dad is better off without her*. Would his mom be better off without his dad?

A part of him already thinks he knows the answer.

When Mike speaks again, he can feel his eyes start to burn and his fingers begin to shake again. "I think my mom would be better off without my dad, but...that really scares the shit out of me."

"Why?" El asks gently.

"Because," Mike begins, falters, "Because sometimes it makes me scared that I'm going to wind up like that. That someone is going to grow up and be better off without me."

He's still not making much sense, but he can't stop talking. As terrible as he feels, there's something immensely therapeutic about getting all these fears he's been harboring for so long off his chest.

"I don't want to be like him," Mike continues, voice low and a little desperate, "I don't wanna grow up to be some deadbeat who never has time for his family."

"You're not going to be like that!" El assures him.

Mike glances at her warily. "How do you know?"

"Because, you're...you're different," El answers, trying to think of a more eloquent way to express her thoughts, "You're kind and you care about your friends and your family. You're considerate and

patient and you're just...different and...and I'd be worse off without you."

As she and Mike's gazes lock, she can see that his eyes are shimmering with tears he's refusing to let fall. He's still holding back, still trying to keep it all in, and it's killing El to see it.

There's a pair of cup holders in front of the backseat, so El sets down her drink before crawling over to Mike.

Mike hears his breath catch as El wraps her arms around him and pulls him in for a hug. She snuggles close to him and tucks her head under his chin. His nose is filled with the smell of rose perfume and soft cotton and though her embrace is so simple, there's something so profoundly reassuring about it.

Mike sets down his drink in the cup holder and hugs her back tightly, grasping her like the life preserver he needs to stay afloat in a tumultuous sea.

As Mike clutches her, El hears him take a deep, rattling breath. She can feel the top of her head start to feel a little damp, and that's when she realizes he's finally letting his tears fall.

She wants to tell him everything's going to be okay, but she's not naive enough to believe that, and she doesn't want to lie to him. Instead, she tells him something that she knows is completely true.

"I'm here," she promises him.

Mike almost wants to laugh, because it's ridiculous how much of an effect two simple words have on him. Just having her in his arms like this makes him feel so much safer. Like, the rest of his problems, while still miserable, don't seem so crushingly overwhelming anymore.

Love, love, love. He loves her so much in this moment and honestly who gave a shit if it was too fast or too soon — he's never needed anyone or anything more.

"I wouldn't leave you," Mike mumbles, voice muffled by her hair, "Like, never."

"I know," El mumbles back, burrowing closer to him.

And that's enough.

They continue to hold each other for what feels like eons. The moment is finally broken when the music fades and the radio announcer loudly begins rattling off the weather report for the upcoming weekend.

"Can we talk about something else?" Mike mumbles, "I mean, I'm glad we gotta talk about all of this, but I don't really want to think about it anymore."

El nods into his chest. "Okay." With that, she pulls back to examine his face thoughtfully. "What do you wanna talk about?"

"You," Mike answers truthfully.

El feels her cheeks grow warm. "Oh."

"It's just," Mike continues, looking somewhat flustered, "I wanna know more about you. I wanna know like, everything."

"Then you should get to know me," El replies abashedly, "Because I wanna know everything, too."

Mike gives the smallest of smiles, and it's like sunlight peeking through the dark clouds after a storm. "You do?" He asks, sounding like he doesn't want to get too hopeful.

El nods and smiles back. "I like you," she says. She hadn't planned on saying that — the words kind of just fell right out of her mouth before she could stop them. Despite the hot wave of embarrassment that rushes over her, it's hard to regret her words once Mike starts to smile even more.

"I like you too," Mike says quietly.

Their faces are flushed as they glance at the other, both questioning whether or not 'like' means anything *more* (it totally does).

Now that El's got him smiling, she doesn't want to stop. She wants to

chase away all of his worries and fears and leave him with nothing but reassuring comfort. She needs to think of a way to get his mind off of everything troubling him.

Her gaze flits about the car before landing on their cups.

"We should play a game," she suggests suddenly, her mind going back to a bunch of movies and TV shows that she's watched.

"A game?" Mike echoes, sounding perplexed.

"Yes," El nods. She pulls away from Mike to grab her Slurpee. The syrupy juice has started to settle near the bottom, so she gives the cup a good shake to mix it all up again. "Never Have I Ever."

"What's that?"

"It's a way to get to know each other," El explains, "You tell the other person something you've never done, and if they've done it, they have to take a drink."

El pauses as she reflects on the TV shows where she's seen this happen. "I think you're supposed to have alcohol, but slushies are just as good."

Mike feels himself brighten. This could definitely be interesting. "Okay," he shrugs, grabbing his cup, "I guess we could try."

"I'll start," El announces. She slides away from him and returns to her original position of sitting with her back to the door.

Mike eyes her expectantly as the radio announcer finally starts playing some music again.

"Never have I ever..." El begins slowly, "Watched a scary movie."

"So, if I've done that, I have to take a drink?" Mike clarifies.

"Yes."

Mike nods understandingly and proceeds to take a sip of his Slurpee.

El smiles encouragingly. "You've got it!" she praises.

Mike smiles appreciatively. "How have you never seen a scary movie though?"

"I don't like them," El confesses.

"They're not so bad," Mike shrugs, "They're all kind of the same, really. We'll just have to watch one together sometime."

El tries not to look too eager by that idea. "We should," she replies breezily.

A beat of silence passes between them, so El gently nudges him with her foot. "Your turn!"

"Oh! Right!" Mike blushes, "Uhh...okay, let me think."

El gives him time to come up with a question, taking the opportunity to check him out a little longer. His skin is pale in the moonlight that shines through the car windows, and the lower lip he's biting on as he thinks looks invitingly soft. His cheeks shine with the iridescent trails of wiped-away tears, and though it reminds El of the somberness they're so avidly ignoring, she also notes that it makes him look more ethereal somehow.

"Never have I ever," Mike finally begins, "Cheated on a test."

El blushes and takes a sip.

Mike's eyes widen as wide as if El had just confessed to like, murder or something. "You have?!"

"Only twice!" El exclaims in defense, "I'm really bad at English, so a couple times I copied some definitions onto my arm."

Mike grins at her. "Wow. So, you're a car thief and a cheater?"

El rolls her eyes playfully and nudges him with her foot again. "I didn't steal your car, dummy. You were in the passenger's seat."

"Likely story," Mike says with an exaggerated sense of suspicion, and

El quickly finds herself holding back giggles.

"Okay!" El continues, moving the conversation along, "Never have I ever...broken a bone."

Mike shrugs before taking a sip.

El's curiosity piques. "When?"

"When Lucas and I raced bikes," Mike answers, "I sprained my ankle when I hit the tree."

"That's not breaking a bone!" El snorts.

"It almost is."

"Still! It's a sprain!"

"Well, sorry!" Mike apologizes, "I guess I shouldn't have drunk, then."

"You shouldn't have," El chastises teasingly.

"I guess I'll just have to put it back," Mike shrugs. He puckers his lips and leans over the cup like he's about to spit his Slurpee back into it.

"Stop!" El exclaims, leaning forward to swat him on the arm, "That's so gross!"

Mike grins impishly as he straightens up. "You scared of a little spit?" He teases.

El knows that that probably wasn't meant to have like, a double meaning to it, but she still blushes anyway. "I'm not scared," she scoffs, "You're just gross."

"You like it, though," Mike says, and though his tone is nonchalant, his mind is pleading *please like it, please like me*.

El only smiles and raises an eyebrow. "It's your turn."

Mike feels his heart skip a beat as he eyes her. He debates whether or not he should say what he wants to say, but after all the sugar he's had and what an emotional night it's been so far, he finds himself

feeling increasingly emboldened.

El watches as a shy smile curves his lips. *He's so pretty*, she finds herself thinking. Knowing how sweet he is as a person only makes this thought radiate further within her.

"Never have I ever...*not* had a crush on somebody," Mike states carefully.

How smooth.

El gives him a wry smirk and doesn't touch her drink.

"Who did you have a crush on?" Mike asks eagerly.

Michael Wheeler, for one. For two—

"There was a guy in my Algebra class," El replies truthfully, "At my old school. But I didn't know him and I never talked to him. He was a transfer student, so I thought his accent was nice."

Mike briefly debates whether or not he should try to get an accent, but ultimately decides against it. "Oh," he replies casually.

"Who did you have a crush on?" El asks curiously.

Mike feels his throat dry up as a blush rushes to his cheeks. "Uhhh..."

Shit, he should have thought this plan through. He frantically thinks back through his memories and is relieved to remember that he actually has had crushes other than El.

"There was this one girl," Mike replies, "At science camp."

El giggles. "You went to science camp?"

"I did!" Mike laughs, gently nudging her with his foot, "It was cool, okay?"

"Oh, yes," El replies, nodding sarcastically, "Very cool."

"Shut up!" Mike beams, "Anyway, she like, built this model rocket, and it actually could like, fly and stuff, and I just thought that was

the coolest thing ever."

El gives him an affectionate grin. She feels like a part of her should hate hearing stories about Mike liking other girls, but she's too distracted by how adorable the image of a young Mike geeking out at science camp would be.

"Anyway, it's your turn," Mike concludes, slouching back against the door.

El bites down on her lip as she considers her words. She knows what she wants to say. All this talk about crushes and spit has kind of spurred it on, but she doesn't know if she's bold enough to actually say it.

"Never have I ever..." El begins hesitantly.

Mike meets her gaze. His hair is dark and wavy, his lips are still soft, his eyes are gentle, his cheeks are dotted with endless amounts of freckles, and —

Yup, she's totally gonna say it.

"...Kissed somebody."

The words leave her mouth, and Mike and El both feel the effect of them as their hearts skip a beat and their stomachs drop.

Did she really just say that? Mike blushing thinks, but as El gives him a shy, expectant look, he realizes that she really did.

Mike doesn't touch his drink.

"You haven't?" El asks, sounding oddly relieved.

"No," Mike admits.

"Oh," El replies.

They both fall silent. As they sit, the radio DJ announces that *Fooled Around and Fell in Love* by Elvin Bishop is up next on the tracklist, and the song begins to filter through the car's speakers.

Maybe it's the song, or the sugar, or the heart-to-heart they'd had earlier, but Mike finds himself talking before he can stop himself.

"Maybe we should, you know, try it," He quickly suggests.

El's eyes widen. "What?"

"Just to get it over with and see what it's like!" Mike adds hastily.

El feels her entire body grow warm. "We should," she echoes, nodding adamantly, "Just to see what it's like."

Mike gives her an anxious smile. "Okay, cool."

El nods shyly. She cautiously sets her drink down in the cup holder, heartbeat quickening as Mike follows suit.

Oh god, this is really happening.

Mike and El both eye each other nervously.

"So, should I just..." Mike begins awkwardly, motioning between them.

El blushes for the millionth time tonight. "Here," she offers. She gently moves his feet onto the floor, slides across the backseat, and sits in front of him. It's kind of a weird position, but it puts her at eye level with him.

Mike looks into her eyes. Her face is soft, yearning, and only inches away from his.

It's just to see what it's like, Mike reassures himself, *There's no pressure.*

Of course, he's pretty sure they both know that's not true, but whatever. Even if it is the biggest lie in the world, it gives Mike the strength to slowly move in, close the gap between them, and place his lips against hers in a gentle kiss.

And —

Holy shit.

Mike isn't quite sure what he expected kissing to be like, but regardless, El definitely blows every possible expectation out of the water. Her lips are soft as they press into his. Her fingers brush against his chest, leaving his skin feeling all tingly beneath his shirt.

It's all instinct, like Mike's body is moving on autopilot. He feels his hands come up to cup her cheeks, holding her closer to him. As El hums against his mouth, he cautiously runs his tongue against her lower lip, tasting her cherry chapstick and that absurd slushie combination that's somehow so much better when mingled with the taste of El.

They stay locked in that embrace — hesitant touches, hitched breaths, pulling back before moving in for more — for what feels like an eternity, but what's actually only a minute or less. After the minute is up, they pull back to catch their breaths, both looking a little starry-eyed.

El is literally breathless. In all the soap operas she watches and romance novels that she reads, the first kiss between a couple was always so passionate and salacious. This kiss hadn't been like that at all — it was soft and gentle, and Mike had held her like she was made of glass, not fiery embers of lust, or whatever the last book she read had said.

While it was perfect in its own right, she finds herself desperate for more.

"Wow," Mike says hoarsely, his eyes dark and his cheeks flushed, "That was—"

"Good," El finishes, "Really good."

Mike smiles at her, looking relieved.

There are a few moments of silence as they continue to exchange blushing, hopeful glances, neither really moving away.

"Maybe we should—" Mike begins hopefully, inching in a little closer.

El's on the same brainwave he is. "More," she smiles.

They move in again and then they're right back where they left off.

The second time their lips meet, it's more along the lines of one of El's novels. They're both so eager that their kisses are quicker, hastier, and a little messier. El just wants to know *everything*. She wants to know what it feels like to kiss his cheeks and nose (amazing). She wants to see what'll happen if she kisses his neck with a little more pressure (Mike gasps, it's also amazing).

The word 'wanton' pops up in a lot of the novels, and it's in this moment that El actually starts to get what it really means. She wants and wants and she doesn't think she'll ever be able to get enough of this, enough of *Mike*. She almost beats herself up for not doing this sooner; during all those guitar lessons and car rides they could have been doing *this* — why weren't they *always* doing this?

El's not sure who causes it, but in a flurry of heated touches and blind blissfulness, she finds herself lying on her back on the backseat. Maybe it was her doing, because her legs were starting to hurt from that awkward position, or maybe it was Mike's, because his eyes are so dark as he moves to lay over her.

Maybe it was a combination of both of them — that seems pretty likely too.

His kisses are growing increasingly needier and El feels her heart start to race in her chest. It's beating so fast she's certain it's going to fly right out.

Let it, El thinks nonsensically, who even cares, really?

As she allows herself to get lost in this blissful moment, everything else becomes irrelevant. Any sounds other than their own shaky breathing and sloppy kisses fade away. She doesn't hear the crickets, the low hum of the radio, or the splash of one of their legs knocking over a Slurpee cup and sending it to the floor.

It's just her and Mike. Mike and El. Michael and Eleanor. El Wheeler. Mike —

— pulling away from her, breaking their kiss.

El blinks up at him, feeling startled. Why did he have to stop? Was something wrong?

"Mike?" She asks worriedly.

Mike is slightly out of breath as he looks down at her, brow furrowed in concern. "W-we shouldn't tell anyone," He stammers, "About this."

Huh?

"This?" El echoes.

"You know," Mike blushes, "That we...uh...kind of...like each other. And that we kissed."

El feels two emotions hit her at once. The first is happiness, because yes, they like each other and Mike is so *amazing* and kissing him is the *best thing ever*.

The second emotion, a much stronger emotion, is hurt. Why doesn't Mike want anyone to know about this? Is he ashamed of her?

El frowns as her heart begins to sink. "What?"

Mike fidgets anxiously as he tries to phrase his reply without hurting her feelings, if that's even possible. "My friends...our friends...don't want us to date."

"What?!"

"Dustin and Lucas, mostly! They think that if we start dating, the band is going to break up."

"That doesn't make sense."

"I know it doesn't. But they keep going on and on about Yoko Ono, and how when she started dating John Lennon the Beatles broke up, and they're just freaking out over it, and I don't wanna piss them off."

El pouts as she lies back on the seat. She hates knowing that Lucas and Dustin are secretly distrustful of her in this way. It makes her feel deceived, somehow. "They don't like me?" El murmurs.

"No!" Mike insists, "They do! They're just nervous is all. They want the band to be okay."

It still doesn't make any sense to El. Why are they just assuming that she would ruin things? It's a little unfair, to be honest, and El's not sure if she should feel sad or angry.

"Oh," she mutters bitterly.

"I'm sorry," Mike says sincerely. He reaches out his hand and gently rubs his thumb over her cheek. "I know it's dumb, but...I just don't want them to get mad."

At least that makes some sort of sense. As much as this news bothers El, she definitely doesn't want to start drama with the band, nor get everyone else mad at Mike.

"Okay," El complies with a sigh, "I won't tell anyone."

Mike's body visibly slackens with relief. "Thanks," he replies, pressing a kiss to her cheek.

Despite El's pensive concerns, when Mike starts peppering her cheeks, nose, and forehead with soft little kisses, she finds herself staying upset for a grand total of zero seconds.

"Maybe it'll even be kind of fun," Mike murmurs against her skin, "Getting to be all sneaky."

El doesn't know how he's able to make her smile, even when she doesn't want to. "You're going to get us in so much trouble!" She exclaims, mimicking his sentiment from earlier as she nudges him.

Mike meets her gaze to smile in response, looking stupidly excited.

As El beams back at him, she starts to feel what he's getting at. There's something alluring about this whole thing — it feels like they're star-crossed lovers from some pulpy romance novel, forced into a forbidden love affair. It's exciting and somewhat dangerous, and the more El thinks about this, the easier it is to push aside the little voice in her head that's telling her this might not be a good idea.

So, that's probably why she curls her fingers in the front of his shirt, pulls him back to her, and starts kissing him again — it's *exciting*.

It's also because she just really, really wants to.

So, despite how badly El wants to talk about how amazing Mike is, how they totally shared their first kisses at Lover's Lane, of all places, how when he drove her home, he kissed her cheek goodnight and El responded by tickling his sides, how Mike's laugh filled her ears and her heart and something else, something *more* —

— she doesn't tell anyone. She keeps all of these blissful, rose-colored memories to herself, reminiscing on them long after Mike's car backs out of her driveway, long after she retires to her room for the night, and well into the time she spends lying awake in bed, gaze directed out her window, counting the stars.

[A/N]: And so the plot thickens!

And I know what you're thinking: YES, those romance books are real books, Mayfield and all.

Once again, thanks for reading! Love you guys!

5. Where Mike and El Are Actual Liars

They're eating lunch on Tuesday when Max decides she'd like to voice what's on her mind.

"*The Wizard of Oz* isn't even that great," She gripes as she eyes a nearby cardboard tree with disdain.

Will gives her an indignant look. "It's one of the most famous musicals of all time!"

"Yeah, but it's boring," Max shrugs.

"You're just upset that the theater kids are taking over next week," Lucas comments.

"Well, yeah, obviously I'm mad about that!" Max huffs. She hates (and loves) that Lucas is able to read her so easily. "This is *our* spot! Where else are we going to eat lunch?" She motions around to their surroundings as she speaks, gesturing to the scattered props and set pieces left behind by the theater crew.

After Max got her lunch, she was the first of the band members to arrive at their spot. Consequently, she was the one that ran into the head of the theater company, who'd crossly reminded Max that starting next week, no one would be allowed in here unless they were a part of the musical.

This happens every year and it never gets less annoying.

"Where do you usually eat lunch when this happens?" El asks. Since it's Tater-Tots Tuesday, she's currently busying herself with stacking as many tater-tots on top of each other as she can (her current record is 4).

"The cafeteria," Will grimaces.

El crinkles her nose. "Oh."

Mike, seated beside El and evidently engrossed in El's tater-tower feat, nods somewhat distractedly. "Yeah, it sucks."

"I thought about trying out for the musical," Dustin chimes in, "Like, once."

"Yeah, because *Stacy* was in it," Lucas snorts. His voice raises to girlish tone as he says Stacy's name, causing the rest of the group (albeit Dustin) to snort with laughter.

"That's not why!" Dustin insists defensively, "I thought it might be fun!"

"You should do it," El says, giving him a smile, "If you want to."

Dustin always feels so caught off guard when El starts talking to him. Mainly because he'd only recently stopped thinking so many jerky thoughts about El Yoko-Onoing the band when she and Mike never even liked each other. He kinda worries that whenever he talks to her, all those negative thoughts will just tumble out of his head and fall right out into the open.

"Well, thanks," Dustin mumbles, "But like, auditions are way over."

"Next year, then!" El suggests.

Dustin gives her a reluctant smile. "Maybe. I'll think about it."

El seems satisfied with this answer and nods. "Good!"

"Speaking of music," Lucas cuts in, "I was thinking that we could start practicing some new songs at band practice today. I was looking through some albums and I found some cool songs we could try out."

"Shouldn't we try to perfect the songs we're already doing though?" Mike frowns, "There's still a lot of songs we're pretty rough on."

Lucas hesitates. "I mean, yeah, but I thought that trying something new might give us a break, since we've been struggling and everything."

"I don't think we need a break," Mike shrugs, "We're only going to get better if we keep practicing."

Lucas starts grinding his teeth together, trying to remain outwardly

nonchalant.

Max can tell he's seething, but she also knows that fighting with Mike would be useless.

The bell rings, ending both the lunch period and the discussion. The band grab their lunch trays and head back to the cafeteria to drop them off.

As they walk down the hallway together, Lucas and Max in the front of the group, Mike and El in the back, Max leans in close to Lucas' ear.

"We can practice your new songs at my place," she quietly offers.

"Thanks," Lucas mutters, "But it won't be the same."

Max frowns. "Do you want me to talk to him?"

They've reached the cafeteria at this point. As Lucas takes his tray and dumps his cold leftover tater tots into the trash, he shakes his head. "Forget it, it's no big deal."

"What's no big deal?" Dustin asks as he moves to stand beside Lucas and empty his own tray.

"You," Max snarks dryly.

Dustin gives her a sarcastic smile as he flips her off. "You're hilarious, Maxine."

Max's eyes flash with a fiery anger. "Call me Maxine one more time and I swear to god, Dustin, I'll take your drumsticks and shove them right up—"

"Hey, guys?" Will interrupts, standing behind everyone else.

Lucas glances over at him. "Yeah?"

Will points behind himself. "Where are Mike and El?"

The rest of the band look over Will's shoulder to where Mike and El

should be.

"I dunno," Dustin shrugs, "I guess they went to class already."

They didn't.

El and Mike had been following the others as they'd walked down the hallway, but the second their friends entered the cafeteria, Mike grabbed his and El's lunch trays, tossed them into the nearest trash can, grabbed El by the hand, and pulled her into a nearby supply closet.

El's shocked, but not exactly upset or anything.

"Mike!" She giggles as Mike shuts the door behind them, "What are you doing?"

Mike pulls her into his arms and nuzzles his face into the crook of her neck. "I couldn't take it anymore."

El bites down on her lower lip as Mike begins to scatter gentle kisses across her neck. "Me neither."

Sitting next to each other, unable to interact for fear of everyone knowing, was unbearable. El just wanted to hold his hand, or give him a hug, or cuddle him, but she couldn't do any of that. It was the literal worst thing ever.

"I miss you," Mike murmurs, nipping at her skin.

El knows what he means, but she still decides to tease him anyway. "We've been together all day!"

"Yeah, but we couldn't do stuff like *this*," Mike counters, and with that, he raises his head and proceeds to kiss her in a desperate, hungry sort of way that leaves El feeling weak in the knees.

El whimpers as she clutches onto him for support. They stumble backward, her back presses against a wall of shelves, her foot lands in an empty bucket, and Mike knocks a broom over, but none of it matters because she's *finally* kissing him again.

They can hear the chatter and footsteps of other students walking past the door, and though part of Mike is worried they'll get caught, another part of him loves how excitingly dangerous the situation is.

We could get caught at any moment, he thinks as El wraps her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. He's still not completely sure whether the thought is thrilling or terrifying.

He holds El securely to keep her from falling, relishing every second they get to spend together. Since they hardly get any opportunities to do this, he's gotta make it count.

Much too soon, the warning bell rings and El pulls away, stopping their kiss with an embarrassingly wet sound.

"Class starts in three minutes," She says breathlessly, cheeks flushed and lips slightly swollen.

"Cool," Mike shrugs, leaning back in.

"Mike!" El smiles, pulling her head back, "We need to go to class!"

Mike pouts. "I know, but I wanna be with you. We got class, then it's right to band practice, and then we have to act like we don't even care about each other."

El's smile falters. "I know," she mumbles.

"It's harder than I thought it'd be," Mike frowns.

El gives him a hesitant look. "Maybe we should tell our friends. Then we wouldn't have to hide."

"No way!" Mike adamantly insists, "They'd be total assholes about it. Plus, I promised Dustin we weren't dating, so he'd be majorly ticked off if he found out I lied."

El nods in a resigning sort of agreement. Silence falls over the pair as they brood over their current predicament, both feeling frustrated.

Then El gets an idea.

"We should go on a secret date!" She suggests hopefully, "Just you and me!"

Mike gives her a curious look. "Where? And when?"

"Anywhere," El shrugs, "On Thursday."

"What about guitar lessons?"

El leans in and begins to nibble on Mike's earlobe, just because she can. "Forget them."

Mike flushes red as El moves her lips to his jawline. He finds himself completely lost in that totally-willing-to-jump-off-a-cliff-if-El-asked-him-to feeling.

"Please?" El pleads between kisses.

"Okay!" Mike replies dopily.

El pulls away to smile excitedly at him. Her happiness draws Mike in like a magnet. He starts leaning in again, his eyes are falling closed, his heart is racing in his chest, and —

The final bell is ringing.

El gives an alarmed squeak as she untangles herself from Mike's embrace. "Class is starting!"

"Well, since we're already gonna be late, we might as well just miss the whole thing," Mike suggests with a grin.

El rolls her eyes and nudges him as she pats her clothing down. "You're so dumb."

Mike steps closer to her and nuzzles his face into her hair. The smell of roses fills his nose and he kind of loves it. "You like it, though," he mumbles, voice muffled.

El bites down on her lower lip. "I do," she admits.

For a moment, Mike actually thinks he's won her over. El turns her

head to look at him with big doe-eyes and a soft smile, but before Mike can even process what's happening, she's kissing him on the cheek and dashing out of the supply closet.

"See you Thursday!" She smilingly whispers over her shoulder as she runs off.

Mike's a little upset, but not exactly shocked or anything. Still reeling from their kisses, he beams after El as she hurries off. Though as he reluctantly heads to his own class, he can't help but worry about the logistics of this date. Sure, messing around in supply closets is one thing, but going out in public together seems risky. What if someone sees them? What if one of their FRIENDS sees them?

Mike tries to push these worries aside as best as he can. During band practice after school, he assures himself that there's no way their friends could know what's going on. He barely even glances in El's direction. He doesn't even call her out for messing up a lyric during one of the songs.

Rationally, he knows that there's no way their friends would just assume they're secretly dating, especially since Mike's making a point to avoid talking about El to them. Nevertheless, as he sits across from El in a booth at *Benny's Burgers* on Thursday night, those worries are still running through his head. He finds himself glancing at the doorway often, scanning the area for a red and blue baseball cap or a huge white van outside in the parking lot.

El is blissfully unaware of all of this. Instead, her focus is solely devoted to devouring the plate of chili cheese fries before her.

"Mikey!" She exclaims, "You should try one of these!"

Mike's head quickly snaps in her direction. "What?"

El motions to her plate. "The fries!"

Mike glances down. "Oh, yeah. Sure." Without saying anything further, he turns his attention back to the window. He drums his leg as he fidgets in his seat. *Did they HAVE to get a booth by the front windows? He should have asked for someplace else...someplace in another*

country, probably...

El glances at Mike and then at his food. His chocolate milkshake and burger have hardly been touched. He's barely even looking at her.

El clears her throat as authoritatively as she can, causing Mike to *finally* look away from the window.

"Yeah?" He asks, looking puzzled.

El hesitates. "I feel like...like you don't want to be here."

"What do you mean?"

"You keep looking out there," El explains, pointing toward the parking lot, "And you've barely eaten anything."

Mike sighs, looking somewhat embarrassed. "I'm sorry, El. I do wanna be here, it's just..."

El eyes him worriedly. "Just—?"

"Sometimes all this sneaking around is fun, but other times I'm kinda freaked out about it. Like, what if our friends come in?" Mike continues anxiously, "I mean, they like to eat here, too."

El, having already thought of this, waves the notion aside. "We'll tell them we got hungry after guitar lessons."

"Do you think that'd work?"

"I don't know Mike," El replies, voice suddenly flat, "They're *your* friends."

She doesn't mean to snap at him — in fact, she hadn't even been consciously aware of her own frustration. But as Mike continues to worry and obsess over what their friends would think of them dating, she finds herself increasingly annoyed. Maybe it's because it serves as a constant reminder that Dustin and Lucas don't trust her, which is totally stupid. She's trying to amend that by being nice to them, but if the way Mike's still freaking out means anything, it's probably not going great.

"They're *our* friends," Mike insists.

"Well, I don't want to talk about them," El frowns, "I don't care what they think of me."

Mike eyes her remorsefully. She makes it sound so easy — just not caring about the opinions of others. Mike wishes he could so effortlessly say 'screw it' to whatever his friends thought, but the over-analytical side of him won't stop stressing about the repercussions of doing so.

"I'm sorry," he finally mumbles, "I know you don't like lying to them."

"I like you," El counters, giving him a serious look.

Mike blushes as he shyly replies, "I like you too."

"And I hate having to act like I don't like you," El continues, "It's fun to sneak around, but I don't want it to be like this forever."

"It won't be forever!" Mike declares adamantly.

"Then how long?"

Mike pauses. "I guess...until the other guys stop being such idiots."

El looks relieved by this. She sits up a little straighter and smiles a little wider. "Fine," she sighs, giving in again.

Mike smiles back at her. "Thank you."

It should be illegal for someone to be as cute as Mike is. As he turns to her with an adorable little smile, El feels her frustrations melt away like the cheese on her fries. *Speaking of which—*

"You have to try one of these," El reiterates, holding out a fry to him, "They're so good."

Mike glances around to make sure the coast is clear before leaning closer and opening his mouth. "Give me a bite."

El holds back a giggle as she leans across the booth and feeds the fry

to him. The majority of the chili doesn't go in and winds up falling on his chin instead.

"Shit," Mike blushes as El bursts into giggles.

"You're a mess," she teases as Mike searches the table for an extra napkin.

"Tell me about it," Mike jokes back.

Ultimately, he can't find an extra napkin. He makes a move to get up from the table, but that's when El leans across the booth, grabs him by the shirt collar, and kisses his jaw.

Mike's eyes fly wide open as El kisses away the mess. He anxiously glances around the restaurant, but the only other person that notices them is an elderly woman seated a few tables away. The woman gives them a dirty look but Mike could honestly care less. This feels amazing and it doesn't look like their friends are anywhere nearby, after all.

El pulls away with a coy smile. "There," she says simply.

"YouWannaHeadBackToTheCar?" Mike asks in a breath.

At least she finally got his attention. El holds back a laugh as she continues to look at him innocently. "What?"

Mike blushes but speaks again, unable to hide the hopeful yearn to his voice. "We could go back to the car."

"You've barely touched your food," El chides, still playing innocent, "Why would you want to go back to the car?"

Mike's entire face is beet red now. "You *know*," he mumbles, glancing down shyly.

"Know what?"

"Are you seriously gonna make me say it?"

El only smiles mischievously in response.

Though Mike gives an exasperated sigh, he's smiling as he blushingly states, "I wanna make out with you."

He's pretty sure the old lady hears this, because she throws them another scowling glance, but whatever. As he and El get up from the table, hastily pay for their food, and hurry out of the restaurant hand-in-hand, their giddy, conspiratorial laughter echoing throughout the quiet parking lot, Mike finds himself worrying about nothing at all.

Unfortunately, the period of not-worrying-about-anything only lasts about 24 hours, give or take a few.

Mike's Friday night shift at Radio Shack goes smoothly enough, Bob even lets it slip that Mike could be up for a promotion in the next few weeks.

And then Mike goes home.

You'd think that after walking into so many of his parents' arguments that Mike would be used to it by now, but the shock never wears off.

He can hear it coming from the kitchen, so he wordlessly hurries upstairs, not wanting to deal with them tonight.

He peeks into Holly's room only to discover that it's empty. He's pretty sure that he heard her talking about a sleepover she was going to over breakfast this morning, so that must be it.

Thank god, Mike bitterly thinks as he heads to his own room, *she doesn't need to be here for this*.

He shuts his bedroom door with a little more force than he intended. A vain part of him hopes that the slamming door will make his parents snap out of it.

It doesn't.

Instead, it plays out like it always does. Mike puts on a pair of headphones and cranks up his Walkman to full-blast, trying to drown out the rest of the world. His parents bicker until they've exhausted themselves. His dad's heavy footsteps make the stairs creak as he

retires to his bedroom. His mom stays downstairs.

Mike should have gone to sleep, but he makes the mistake of heading downstairs. It's like there's this morbid, insufferable curiosity pulling him along, guiding him toward the aftermath of the argument. He wants to know what happened, even though he knows it won't be anything surprising.

The house is quiet as he draws closer to the kitchen. He can hear his mom talking on the phone — it sounds like the call is to one of his aunts.

What he hears makes him wish he'd stayed in his room. With each frustrated declaration Mrs. Wheeler makes, Mike feels a bit of his mental foot-holding start to crumble away. He feels dizzy and terrified and completely, utterly lost.

He's pretty sure his mom doesn't know he was listening, but he doesn't stick around to tell her. Mike fumbles back outside to his car and gets behind the wheel. He's not sure where he's planning on going, but he knows he's just got to go somewhere that's *not here*.

He allows himself to be moved along again, following instinct as he drives down the dark streets of Hawkins. It's well after sundown and the porch lights on the neighboring houses have been turned off, leaving only the street lamps and the isolated glow of Mike's headlights as a source of light. There's a crackle of thunder off in the distance and before long, big fat raindrops begin to splatter across his windshield.

He can feel his eyes start to burn but he doesn't stop driving. He keeps going, mindlessly turning down street corners, hopefully not running too many stop-signs, until—

El's house.

When he pulls up, the lights are all off and the driveway is empty. The rain is falling in full force now; it comes down harshly as it pounds against the roof of his car. His windshield wipers are at the fastest setting and still struggling to keep up.

Mike doesn't know what he's doing here. From how dark the house is, it's questionable whether or not anyone's home.

He needs to see her. The thought presents itself to him simply and unashamedly, and it's what pushes Mike to park his car along the street and hurry up to El's front step.

He rings the doorbell twice. As he stands in front of the door, getting drenched, he raises his hands to hold himself, trying to keep warm.

Please be home, please be home.

His teeth are starting to chatter and his mop of hair is wilting to a slicked mess. Just as he's starting to consider walking back to his car, the front door swings open and *there she is*.

She's wearing a simple camisole and a pair of flannel pajama pants that look a little weathered around the hem. Her hair is a tousled mess and it looks like she literally just rolled out of bed.

"Mike?" She asks, sounding both confused and concerned.

Mike opens his mouth to reply, but his voice cracks. *Shit, why does he still feel like crying?* He can't, not in front of her, not in front of *anyone*.

El watches as he shakes his head wordlessly for a moment. His eyes are red and his body is shivering like crazy.

"I'm sorry," Mike finally says, voice thin and wavering, "There was shit going on at home and I didn't know where else to go and—"

El pulls him inside without a word. She closes the door behind them, reducing the roar of the storm to a muffled hum. The house is dark and quiet. Mike assumes that her dad must not be home, he's pretty sure the Chief of Police would be curious about a random guy wandering into his house after hours.

"My dad's on the night shift," El says, as if she read his mind, "He'll be home in the morning."

Mike swallows as he glances at her. "It must be pretty scary for you,

being alone all night here."

El blinks at him. He's dripping water into a big puddle that's pooling on the foyer floor. He's still shaking from the cold, still wearing his Radio Shack uniform — for Christ's sake, and he's still worrying about *her*?

He really can be an idiot sometimes. Too much of the time. All the time, actually.

El feels her eyes begin to sting as she smiles at him. "You're so dumb," she says, not unkindly.

Mike offers her a small smile, but she can tell his heart isn't in it. He's still shaking and El's starting to realize that it might be from more than the cold.

"C'mon," she whispers, grabbing him by the hand.

Mike nods in response and allows himself to be led down the hallway and into El's bedroom.

The room is covered with a soft blush wallpaper that matches the quilt she has on her bed. The walls are decorated with a few band posters and random postcards. She has a big window that overlooks the backyard and the ongoing thunderstorm. In the corner is the guitar he gave her, alongside a folder El labeled *sheet music* with a couple heart doodles. There's a single lamp lit on the nightstand, casting the dark bedroom with a warm glow. As Mike takes this scene in, he realizes her room smells like her too.

El shuts her bedroom door behind them and locks it. She turns to look up at him with worried eyes and a tentative gaze.

Mike takes a seat on the edge of her bed, still holding himself. He's safe now, he's with El, he got what he wanted.

So, why does he still feel like shit?

El carefully moves to stand before him. Every move she makes is so delicate, so cautious, that Mike briefly worries that she's scared of him.

Probably scared for him, actually.

The thought raises more questions than it answers. Should she be scared for him? Was he really that screwed up? Was his life really that shitty?

"Mike," El begins quietly, "What happened?"

And suddenly, it's like the floodgates burst open. All these questions and burdens and worries Mike's been carrying with him come tumbling out in one rushed, rambling mess.

"M-my parents were arguing again tonight. Holly's gone which is good b-but I'm just so sick of hearing them fighting all the time and they don't even seem to care that I'm th-there or that I can hear them and when I-I went downstairs after they finished I could hear my m-mom talking on the phone and sh-she sounded so upset. She said that sometimes she thinks about getting a d-divorce but she can't b-because she wants her kids to have a normal family but we don't even have that — we're not normal and they're always fighting and everything and it s-sucks so bad but I also don't want our family to b-break up! I don't want to get a new dad or move away or anything — I just w-want everything to be n-normal again!"

His voice cracks pathetically on the last word, and that's when he knows he's going to cry.

"Sh-shit," he wavers, and that's when he falls apart.

El feels her body grow tense as she helplessly watches Mike cry. He buries his face in his hands as sobs wrack his body.

She's not prepared for this. She's never had to deal with anyone crying in front of her like this. Her dad definitely wasn't a big crier, at least not in front of her. When her mom had left, her dad had never shed a tear in front of El. She suspected he might have when he was alone, but when he was with her it was nothing but stony, hardened silence.

El wants to do something to help Mike, but her muscles are rigid and her feet suddenly feel as if they're nailed to the floor. As she stands

locked in place, she wracks her mind frantically, desperate to find a way to get him to stop crying.

Stop, stop, stop — you need to make him stop.

But then...

She considers something else. Maybe, just maybe, trying to get Mike to stop crying shouldn't be her main goal. El knows that he spends so much time pushing his emotions aside, caring for his sister, and worrying about what his friends want. He spends so much time dealing with everyone else's shit that he barely takes any time for himself. Perhaps the best thing El can do for him is to just let him cry it all out — to sit back and let him rid himself of all these burdens he's had to carry alone.

And so, instead of trying to quiet him, El instead crawls onto the bed, kneels behind him, wraps her arms around him from behind, and envelopes him in the best hug she can offer. Her torso quickly becomes damp but she doesn't stop, nor does she try to get him too, either.

As Mike continues to cry, El can feel his body shaking in ragged, harsh movements. Since he's sitting and she's kneeling, she's able to rest her chin on his shoulder and bury her face in his neck.

"I'm here," she mumbles into his skin, hoping the words will work as they did before. The words do seem to help, at least a little. Mike's breath hitches and his cries seem to decrease in volume.

El raises her hands and begins to massage his shoulders, kneading her fingers into him with a tender reverence. As she works, she occasionally pauses to kiss Mike's shoulder, nape, or neck. The kisses aren't like the ones they shared in the diner or in the supply closet — they're soft, comforting, and chastely affectionate.

Time passes and eventually Mike's cries decrease to a few hiccuping breaths and snotty-sounding sniffles. Even after he settles down, El continues to massage his shoulders, determined to make him feel completely comforted.

Neither of them speak for a long while, both listening to the continual wail of the storm outside.

Mike ultimately decides to break the silence. "I-I'm sorry," He hiccups, rubbing his eyes.

"For what?" El frowns.

"C-crying," Mike answers, "I know guys aren't s-supposed to."

El gives him an incredulous look. "Who told you that?"

"M-my dad."

"I hate your dad," El says flatly.

Her bluntness takes Mike by surprise — so much so that he nearly chokes. He turns to glance over his shoulder at her but there's not a hint of amusement in her eyes. El's gaze is narrowed as she frowns at nothing in particular, gripping his shoulders tightly.

"Don't be mad," Mike murmurs hoarsely, raising his hand to brush against her cheek.

"I'm mad," El grouses. She's furious, actually. Mike doesn't deserve this. It's not fair that someone as wonderful as him should have to come home to such a terrible situation, and El finds herself needing someone to pin the blame on. "I want you to be happy."

"I am happy," Mike assures her, "Right now, anyway."

El eyes him warily, so Mike offers her the best smile he can muster. It's not very convincing and he's sure that El can see right through it, but it's better than nothing.

El looks him over for several moments before she finally relents. Her grip on him loosens as she pulls away and gets off the bed. "We should get you out of these wet clothes," she murmurs, standing before him, "You're going to get sick."

"I'm fine," Mike insists, but El is already moving forward to loosen his tie.

"You don't have to lie to me," El gently chastises as she slips off his tie and moves to his shirt buttons.

"Sorry," Mike mumbles, truly meaning it.

El continues to work without another word. She peels off his shirt and gently lays it out on the floor. She comes back and motions for him to stand up, so he does. Her fingers move toward his belt and though Mike blushes furiously, El doesn't make any salacious moves. Her actions are deftly comforting; as she works, Mike can hear her softly humming a tune — he realizes moments later that it's *Blackbird*.

He thinks about telling her that he loves her, but he also wonders whether standing soaking wet and not entirely dressed would really be the best time and place for such an important confession.

After El's stripped him down to his boxers, she lays out the rest of his clothes beside his shirt. "Hopefully, they'll be dry by morning," She remarks.

Mike blinks at her. "Morning?"

El nods and moves back toward the bed. She climbs under the covers and pats the empty space beside her, motioning for him to join her.

Mike hesitantly moves after her. As he climbs under the covers beside her, El turns to her nightstand and shuts the lamp off. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness; once they do, he sees that El's lying in her side, facing him.

"Hi," he murmurs, offering her another small smile.

"Hi," El murmurs back. She slides closer and wraps her arms around his torso, snuggling him like a giant teddy bear. Mike responds by wrapping his arms around her waist, keeping her close.

They stay close together, a tangled heap of intertwined limbs, gentle touches, and fluttering heartbeats. Even though they're all alone in her bedroom and everything, just like with El's earlier kisses, there's no sexual tension bubbling under the surface. They're both just seeking comfort in the best way that they can. Mike finds himself

wishing that he could spend every night with her like this (though hopefully without all the crying and stuff).

After a bit, El pulls her head back to look at him lovingly. "Are you feeling any better?"

Mike nods. "Thanks," He whispers as he holds her gaze, "For everything."

El nods back. His eyes are still red from crying, and when El leans in to kiss his cheeks, she can taste the salty residue his tears left on his skin. The bitterness doesn't deter her though. As she continues to scatter tiny kisses across his cheeks and nose, she follows his freckles like a guide, using them to create paths for her to move along.

Mike gently nudges her with his nose, El pauses to look at him, and then they're moving in to exchange slow, lazy kisses. It's all effortlessly natural, at this point. Their mouths move together in an easy, practiced motion, lips gradually parting to deepen the kiss.

God, I love her, Mike dazedly thinks again as El hums against him. Should he tell her this though? What if it's too soon for her? Mike doesn't wanna freak her out, and he definitely doesn't want to lose her.

He decides to hold off for now. There's something so blissfully perfect about this moment and Mike doesn't want to ruin it in any way.

Eventually, their kiss breaks so that they can stop to catch their breath. Mike rests his forehead against hers as they both try to steady their breathing.

El's got *that* glint in her eye, the one that Mike now knows means she's got something mischievous on her mind.

"What?" He smiles, nuzzling their noses together.

"If you're still feeling sad, we could go get slushies," El offers, only half-joking.

"The weather's too bad," Mike smiles wryly. "Besides, my taste buds are still recovering from last time."

"They seem fine to me," El teases before leaning in to give him another brief French kiss.

Mike blushes as she pulls back again. "They're not," he jokes, "They'll never get over your gross drink choices."

El smiles back at him. "Like you don't like eating something weird."

Mike pauses to think for a moment. "I guess...I like putting syrup on my eggs. My sister Nancy thinks it's disgusting, but whatever."

El's eyes light up. "I do that too!"

Mike's eyes widen. "You do?"

El nods. "My dad also thinks it's gross, but I don't care."

Okay, so Mike definitely loves her.

"You're amazing," he murmurs, curling his fingers in her hair and pulling her in for another kiss.

El giggles into his mouth. She mumbles something about how much of a dummy he is, but the jab is easily muffled by Mike's eager kisses.

"Sometimes," El confesses after Mike pulls back again, "I like putting Milk Duds on my popcorn."

"Do you eat anything normally?" Mike teases, to which El elbows him.

"It's good!" She defends.

"I'm sure it is," Mike nods, voice dry with sarcasm.

"Shut up," El smiles.

"Make me," Mike shoots back.

"I will," El smiles, leaning in for another kiss.

She does.

When Mike wakes up the next morning, the rain has stopped. The sun is streaming through El's bedroom window. Mike can hear El's soft snores alongside the gentle drip of water falling from the roof gutter outside. There are some birds chirping in the distance and the whole scene feels like something out of a Hallmark card.

He's spooning her from behind, his face buried in her messy hair. His bare legs are interlocked with hers and as he shuffles them idly, the worn flannel of her pajama pants brushes against him. Everything is soft and warm and just...perfect.

He doesn't want to wake her, so he continues to snuggle her contently, wanting to savor every last second of this blissful moment.

He gets to savor approximately 10 more seconds. Then there's a loud knock on El's bedroom door that causes both Mike and El to jolt straight up in bed.

"El?" A gruff voice calls out.

El's eyes are wide with terror. "Y-yeah?"

"I'm making breakfast," the voice, presumably of her father, replies, "What do you want?"

El glances at Mike, their alarmed expressions nearly identical.

Do you think he knows? Mike mouths.

I don't know! El mouths back frantically.

"El?"

"Waffles!" El quickly calls back.

"Alright, then." Her father leaves, his heavy footsteps thudding down the rest of the hallway. When they hear the kitchen radio turn on, El turns to look at Mike.

"You have to go!" El hisses, "If he finds out I let a boy spend the night, he'll kill me!"

"But we didn't even do anything!" Mike hisses back.

"He won't care!" El persists.

Mike, remembering that her dad probably owns a gun and a pair of handcuffs, doesn't protest any further. He hastily scrambles out of El's bed and grabs his clothes off of the floor.

"You can go out the window," El whispers as Mike redresses, "I'll go into the kitchen and distract him so he doesn't see you leaving."

"Good idea," Mike nods, buttoning up his shirt. His shirt isn't tucked in, the buttons are uneven, and his tie hangs in a limp, pathetic knot, but he's technically decent.

Despite the dire situation they're in, El can't help but smile at his haphazard appearance. "You look ridiculous," she whispers lightly.

"You like it," Mike grins, stepping closer to her.

"I love it," El grins back.

Mike closes the gap between them and gives her one last passionate kiss goodbye. El can feel her resolve weakening as she melts in his arms. She has to force herself to pull away and push him toward her bedroom window.

"Go!" She whispers, blushing happily.

"Bye!" Mike whispers back. He unlocks her bedroom window and climbs out, feet landing on the damp grass with a quiet thud. The morning air is cool and crisp as he glances around the empty backyard. He can hear El shut the window behind him but he doesn't stop to look. Instead, he quickly runs around the side of the house, heart pounding in his chest.

He just has to make it to his car. Once he's there he can drive off and her dad won't even know and everything will be fine.

He rounds the front of the house, nearly slipping on a muddy patch of grass. He can see the Hawkins police cruiser parked in the driveway, which nearly gives him a mini heart-attack—

—But it's nowhere near as bad as the heart attack he gets when he sees the Hawkins Chief of Police leaning against Mike's car, directly facing him, contemplatively drinking a cup of coffee.

Shit, shit, shit, SHIT.

Mike freezes in place, blinking at the man like a deer in the headlights. Even though El's father isn't in uniform (rather, a flannel shirt and jeans), he's no less intimidating. He's tall, muscular, and looks like he could definitely crush Mike just by like, looking at him.

Mike continues to stare at him.

Her dad stares back.

Just as Mike's considering digging a grave for himself in El's front lawn, her dad finally speaks.

"Morning, kid," he calls over, raising his coffee mug to Mike.

Mike swallows. "Morning," he replies weakly.

Her dad takes another sip of his coffee, not breaking eye contact.

The silence is deafening. Mike doesn't think he can stand it for a moment longer, so he anxiously blurts out, "This isn't what it looks like!"

"Oh?" Her dad replies, quirking an eyebrow, "What's it look like to you?"

Mike stammers helplessly. He glances down at his unkempt hair and clothes. He's pretty sure El gave him a hickey while she was 'shutting him up' last night, and Mike just prays to every deity he can think of that her dad can't see it from where he's standing. "That we...you know...we were..."

Her dad looks at him with a feigned interest.

Is he seriously going to make Mike say it?

Like father, like daughter, a deliriously desperate part of Mike thinks.

Mike opens his mouth to say it, but he's pretty sure if he had to say '*it looks like we slept together*,' he'd die of humiliation. "It looks bad," Mike says instead, still feeling pretty humiliated, "But I swear, nothing happened! I needed a place to spend the night and—"

Her dad holds up a hand to cut him off. "I got it," he says simply, though Mike's still worried that he has the wrong idea.

There's another beat of silence before her dad motions to Mike with his cup again. "Mike, right?"

Mike nods. "Yes, sir."

"You don't need to 'sir' me, kid," her dad snorts, "Just 'Hopper' is fine."

Mike nods again. "Yes, si—Hopper."

There's a flash of something across Hopper's face — it almost looks like a smile, but Mike tells himself he's probably just seeing things. He's 99% sure Hopper's still gonna kill him.

Hopper finishes off his coffee and clears his throat. The simple sound causes Mike to flinch, earning another snort from Hopper.

"Fix your shirt, kid," Hopper instructs, "And come inside."

Mike nods hastily. As he fixes the buttons on his shirt, Hopper stops leaning against Mike's car and leads the way back into the house.

El's waiting in the living room when they enter. "Dad!" She exclaims anxiously, "There you are! I was looking all over the house for you and—"

When Mike steps out from behind Hopper, El stops mid-sentence.

Hopper smiles at El challengingly, saying nothing. El blinks at him for a moment before continuing, much more hesitantly, "Mike! What a surprise!"

"It's not that much of a surprise," Hopper smirks. He moves past El and heads into the kitchen.

Mike and El exchange startled looks before following after him.

"I'm sorry," Mike hisses, "He was waiting outside."

"It's okay!" El whispers back, offering a reassuring smile.

Hopper's busy at work in the kitchen when they join him. His back is to them and his sleeves are rolled up as he pours some batter onto a waffle iron. The radio is still playing; El recognizes it as the country station Hopper not-so-secretly likes.

"Sit down," he instructs, not looking at them.

There's an island in the center of the kitchen. Mike and El take their seats at the stools before it, both feeling rattled.

They sit and watch as Hopper busies himself making breakfast. The kitchen fills with the sounds and smells of frying bacon and brewing coffee.

El has no clue what her dad is doing. He's not yelling at them, which is nice and all, but this cryptic silence is somehow even worse. She doesn't know what to expect, nor how to prepare herself.

"How did you know?" El finally asks.

Hopper glances over his shoulder to smile at her. He almost looks like he's going to laugh. "I'm not stupid, kid. He's been driving you to school every morning — I know what his car looks like."

Mike smiles sheepishly. "Sorry."

"We didn't do anything!" El bursts, "He just slept in my room!"

"I believe you," Hopper assures her.

El and Mike blink at him, dumbfounded. "You do?!" They both reply.

"I do," Hopper contends. After checking on the food, he turns to face both of them, arms folded across his chest. "So, you gonna tell me what's going on?"

Mike and El glance at each other again. El nods, wordlessly assuring Mike that he can trust him.

And so Mike tells him everything. He leaves out all the supply-closet/backseat-of-his-car details, but he gives Hopper a brief summary of everything that's happened between them — how they met, the guitar lessons, lying to their friends, how El's been comforting him through his parents' fighting, and why he came over last night.

By the time he finishes, Mike's thoroughly winded. His mouth also feels quite dry from talking so much, though that problem is fixed once Hopper passes him a cup of coffee.

As Mike gulps down the coffee, El wrings her fingers together. "That's it," she states nervously.

Hopper studies them both for what feels like hours, even though it's probably only a few moments. Both Mike and El shift in their seats uncomfortably, neither daring to glance at the other.

"You guys don't have to lie, you know," Hopper finally says, "Not to me and not to your friends. If they really cared about you, they wouldn't try to split you up."

If only it was that simple. Mike has to stop himself from snorting dismissively. Instead, he keeps his gaze trained on the coffee in front of him. The mug has a Chicago PD emblem on it and a small chip along the rim.

"We're not going to lie forever," El points out, "We'll tell them soon."

Hopper gives her a doubtful look. "And when is soon?"

El shrugs. "Soon."

Hopper continues to eye El warily, but El only smiles wider.

Hopper turns to look at Mike. "Good luck with this one," he says dryly, jabbing his finger toward El.

Mike's unable to stop himself from snorting this time, though it's not dismissive. Rather, it's followed by an enthusiastic round of laughter

that even Hopper joins in on.

"Hey!" El exclaims indignantly, glaring at both of them.

As Hopper's laughs die down, he stretches his arm across the counter island to ruffle her hair. "I'm kidding."

"Sure," El huffs with a pout.

The sizzle of the cooking bacon starts to crackle and pop with an increased intensity, so Hopper turns away from them again to tend to the food.

Mike turns to glance at El with relief. *That went better than I thought*, his expression reads. El smiles in reply and nods.

"Listen," Hopper continues, getting a pair of plates out of the cupboard, "I can't force you guys to do anything, but I just don't think that lying to your friends is a good idea."

El fidgets with a strand of her hair, absentmindedly twirling it around her finger. "Okay."

"But you two are old enough to make that decision on your own," Hopper continues, "So, that's that."

A part of Mike knows that Hopper is right, but he can't bring himself to admit it yet. "Okay," he replies, echoing El.

Hopper prepares two plates of food. He turns back to them and hands them over, nodding when they offer two polite 'thank you's.'

As Mike glances down at his plate loaded with waffles, bacon, and eggs, he feels warm and content in a way he never expected to be. There's something so domestic and calming about having Saturday-morning breakfast with El's dad. It's something he definitely would struggle to get at home with his own dad.

It's almost as if Hopper can read his thoughts, considering what he says next. "And kid," Hopper says firmly, looking directly at Mike, "If you ever need a place to spend the night or just get away from home for awhile, you're welcome here."

Mike keeps his gaze trained on his plate, suddenly feeling bashful for some lame reason. "Thanks," he mumbles.

"Just call me next time," Hopper continues, throwing El a warning look, "And keep the door open."

"We will!" El and Mike nod gratefully.

"Good."

With that settled, Hopper turns back to the cupboard to retrieve a bottle of syrup for them. He passes it across the kitchen island to El, who accepts it gratefully.

El grabs the bottle of syrup and proceeds to drizzle it all over her plate — eggs, bacon, waffles, and all. Once she's done, she passes the bottle to Mike, who does the same.

"You guys are gross," Hopper chides, crinkling his nose at their syrup-drenched plates.

"It's good!" Mike and El insist.

"Stop doing that," Hopper grumbles.

"Doing what?" Mike and El ask.

"Talking at the same time. It's weird."

"Sorry," Mike and El reply together. Hopper groans with an exaggerated amount of disdain, but Mike and El only exchange gleeful smiles.

All of them huddled around the kitchen island eating breakfast is quite the unusual scene — Hopper out of uniform, El in her pajamas, and Mike in his rumpled Radio Shack uniform. But as El takes it all in, she realizes that there's something about this that feels effortlessly natural. Like Mike should be here all the time. Like he belongs with her. Like maybe El more than likes him. Like maybe she just might lo

"You want more syrup, El?" Mike asks, interrupting her thoughts.

El feels her cheeks flush with warmth as she nods.

Mike passes the bottle back to her. Their fingertips brush and though El's touched him a million times before, the realizations hovering in the back of her mind cause the simple action to leave goosebumps on her skin.

Love, she thinks, as if she's mentally trying the word on for size.

It seems to fit.

It's Sunday night and they're approximately 10 minutes late.

Technically, it's El's fault this time. When Mike parked his car in the movie theater parking lot, he'd turned to her, given her literally the cutest smile ever, and said, "So, you ready to watch your first scary movie?"

El opened her mouth to reply, but then she became aware of just how *cute* he looked right then, and how the movie theater parking lot was located in the back of the building, and how it was nighttime, so they had a fair amount of privacy.

She leaned in, one thing led to another, and now they're doing what they always do when they're alone together lately.

She's straddling him, despite the confines of the cramped front seat. Mike's got one hand curled into the back of her shirt. The other is holding the back of her head, keeping her close. It's a pretty tight squeeze being trapped between Mike and the steering wheel, but they're making it work. Besides, when he's kissing her like he is right now, El could care less about the steering wheel that's digging into her spine.

She kinda cares that technically their friends are waiting for them, though. The thought of them standing around in the theater lobby, waiting for Mike and El to show up kinda kills the mood a bit.

"We should probably go inside," El says between kisses.

"Probably," Mike replies before leaning in again.

Unable to stop herself, El meets his mouth halfway. She curls her fingers in his hair as their kiss deepens, lavishing the effortless softness of his wavy curls.

Then she makes the mistake of opening her eyes.

Her gaze flits over to a parking space several feet away, where Max's unmistakable white van is parked. She remembers again that Max is inside the theater, waiting for them. Lucas is probably with her. Considering Mike and El are currently 15 minutes late, everyone else is probably already there, too.

El pouts as she forces herself to pull away from Mike. *One* of them has to be responsible, after all.

Mike gives a disappointed little whine and tries to move back in. El stops him by placing a hand over his mouth.

"We need to go!" El reminds him, "It's going to look weird if we're both late."

"You started it!" Mike mumbles into her hand.

El kisses his nose. "I know, I'm sorry."

Mike continues to sulk as he gives her a glassy-eyed puppy-dog pout. It's so adorable it's honestly a little unfair, and as El continues to look at him, she finds her resolve weakening.

She's wearing the aviator sunglasses she bought at the mall on top of her head, so she decides to slip them off and place them on Mike. She slides them into place, perfectly masking the major heart-eyes he's got going on.

"There," El giggles as she looks at him.

Mike grins back at her. "What are these?"

"Glasses."

"Wow, really?" Mike replies dryly.

"You should wear them," El says hopefully, running her fingers through his hair again, "They make you look bitchin'."

Mike blushes modestly. "They do?"

"Yes!" El giggles, "Like a rock star."

Mike seems pleased with this. He smiles proudly for a moment before he begins to lean back in, and if it wasn't for the fact that El can still see Max's van, she totally would have kissed him back.

Instead, she crawls off of his lap and back into the passenger's seat where her bag is. "Let's go!" She instructs, ignoring his renewed whines of protest.

It takes a few more pleads on El's part, but Mike finally gets out of the car and follows her into the theater.

Their friends are indeed waiting when Mike and El walk into the lobby together. As the pair walks up to the group, they're greeted with varying levels of enthusiasm.

"You guys are here!" Will says cheerily.

"What took you so long?" Dustin asks skeptically.

"I had to drop Holly off at her friends' house before getting El," Mike lies, "Sorry."

Lucas folds his arms over his chest as he eyes Mike warily. "Why are you wearing sunglasses inside at night? You look like a douche bag."

"No, I don't!" Mike replies crossly.

"You do," Max snorts. The glasses look oddly familiar to her, but she supposes that's just because they look like every pair of sunglasses ever.

Mike huffs and pushes the aviators up and into his hair. The action causes some strands of hair to slick back while others curl forward, and *holy shit*, it's so hard for El to not totally check him out right now. She has to force herself to stare down at the red-carpeted floor

like it's the most interesting thing she's ever seen.

Max eyes the pair of them carefully. They're both standing a good foot or two apart, which seems a little weird. At the bowling alley, they were so close whenever they were walking or sitting together. Plus, El's not noticeably drooling over him like she always is. Instead, she seems to be making a point of ignoring him.

Something's clearly off.

"So," El continues, looking up at their group, "What's the name of the movie we're going to see?"

"The Silver Bullet!" Dustin replies eagerly, "It's about werewolves and murder and stuff!"

El feels her stomach start to churn, but she does her best to keep a brave face. "Cool," she replies casually.

"We got the tickets already, so we just need snacks," Lucas informs them. "Let's hurry up, the movie's gonna start soon."

Everyone else nods in agreement. As the boys follow Lucas over to the concessions counter, Max grabs El by the sleeve and pulls her off to the side, several feet away from the others.

"Max?" El asks confusedly, "What's going on?"

Max hesitates. "I just, uh, wanted to make sure everything's okay."

"What do you mean?" El frowns.

"You and Mike are acting a little weird," Max explains. When El only looks more startled, Max decides to elaborate further. "You guys seem really quiet, I guess. Did you like, get in a fight or something?"

El blinks at her for a moment before her face relaxes into a smile. "No!" She exclaims with a light laugh, "We didn't argue!"

"You sure?" Max asks skeptically.

El nods.

"Okay...well, if something's ever wrong, you know you can tell me, right? I know Mike can be a little —"

"He's fine!" El cuts in, "We both are."

"Okay, okay!" Max relents, "Sorry I asked, I guess."

"You guys need to get over here!" Dustin calls out suddenly, "We need your snack order!"

El and Max nod in his direction before turning back to each other.

"Thanks for looking out for me," El quickly says.

Max feels herself relax at that. "Of course, El. We girls gotta look out for each other, right?"

El smiles. "Right."

The girls exchange a quick hug before going to join the boys at the concession counter.

"I'll just have some licorice," Max says as she sidles up to Lucas.

The boy working the counter appears to be their age — Max's pretty sure she's seen him around school before. As he punches in Max's order, he turns to look at Will. "Alright, next?"

Will blushes furiously. "I'd like some popcorn," he mumbles shyly, glancing at his feet.

Jeez, and Max thought that Wheeler was the one who suffered from heart-eyes-itis in their group. Clearly, it's contagious.

Max holds back a giggle but doesn't say anything. Not until later, anyway.

"What about you?" The boy asks, turning to look at Mike.

Mike scans the menu that's hanging on the wall behind the employee's head. "Uhhh...I'll take one large popcorn anddddddd...a box of Milk Duds."

El, standing beside Max, fails to muffle her gasp. Her cheeks are bright pink as she affords one glance in Mike's direction, but one glance is all. Seconds later, she's right back to looking at everything but him.

Max's brow furrows in confusion. Literally why do all of her friends have to be so weird?

"What about you?" The boy asks, glancing at El.

"I'm fine!" El manages to squeak back.

"You can have some of mine," Mike offers casually.

El nods, blushing harder.

As Lucas and Dustin already ordered before Max and El arrived, the employee proceeds to ring up their order. The band members all hand over the appropriate amount of cash and begin to wait for their snacks to be retrieved.

As the boy turns away from them, Max leans over to Will. "You should ask for his number," she whispers, only half-joking.

Will turns to look at her, eyes wide and face flushed. "What?"

"You're totally drooling," Max smiles.

Will looks back at her worriedly. "I am? Do you think he noticed?"

"He'd have to be an idiot if he didn't."

"Great," Will frowns.

"No, that's a good thing!" Max insists, making sure to keep her voice low, "How else are you gonna find out whether he's into you or not?"

"He probably isn't," Will pouts.

"And he'd have to be an idiot if he wasn't," Max reiterates, smiling warmly at Will.

Will gives her a grateful smile in return. At that same moment, the

boy returns with their snacks.

"Here you go," he says, sliding them across the counter with a pleasant smile.

"Thank you!" Will replies, still blushing like crazy.

The band members grab their snacks and head to the theater The Silver Bullet is playing in. There are some other patrons scattered throughout the seats, but not an overwhelming amount.

"I guess watching horror movies isn't a popular Sunday night activity," Mike remarks under his breath.

"No shit," Lucas replies dryly, "We should all probably be in church or something."

The group gets a bit of a laugh at that as they take their seats. Will sit down first, followed by Dustin, Mike, El, Max, and Lucas.

As they all settle down, Mike opens the box of Milk Duds and empties them into his popcorn bucket.

"What the hell?" Dustin whispers in alarm.

"It's good!" El whispers back.

"Can I try some?"

El nods.

Dustin retrieves a handful of popcorn from Mike's bucket.

"Dude! Get your own!" Mike frowns.

Dustin shushes him before taking a bite. "Yeah, it's good," he decides a moment later.

El smiles proudly before sitting back in her seat.

The lights dim as the projector whirs to life behind them. As the movie begins to play, Mike casually lets his left hand hang off the armrest. El glances at him shyly before allowing her right hand to do

the same. Their fingers brush against each other in the dark and they both fail to hold back contented smiles.

The movie isn't even that scary, and yet El still finds herself on the edge of her seat throughout it. When things get too intense or graphic, she hurriedly turns her attention to the popcorn bucket. She never knew herself to be a nervous eater, but you were supposed to learn new things every day, right?

Mike can tell she's on edge. It's killing him to just have to sit here while she's obviously upset. She keeps flinching and frowning and she's consumed nearly all the popcorn by now.

Mike glances at the others before leaning in close to her. "You wanna step out for a minute?" He whispers into her ear.

El hesitates, but nods.

Max watches as Mike pulls away and El whispers, "Thanks, Mikey."

Mikey? Max frowns. What the hell was that about? That had to be the lamest nickname ever.

Mike grabs his bucket, rises to his feet, and turns to the others. "We're going to get more popcorn," He whispers.

"Then go!" Dustin frowns, "Your ass is blocking the screen!"

El and Mike squeeze past everyone and exit the theater.

"Do you think they're okay?" Max whispers.

"Who knows?" Lucas replies disinterestedly, "Aren't they just getting popcorn?"

"I think so," Max replies.

"Then don't worry about it," Lucas says, reaching out to give her hand a squeeze.

Max smiles as their fingers intertwine. "Okay."

"SHHH!" Dustin hisses, "I can't hear what's happening!"

Max flips him off with her free hand before returning her attention to the movie. She tries not to worry like Lucas suggested, but as more time passes and Mike and El still haven't returned, she starts to get worried.

It's been at least 20 minutes by now. *How long does it take to get popcorn anyway?* Certainly not this long, especially since the theater is kind of dead tonight.

What if El's really upset over the movie? Or like, totally freaking out? What if she needs help?

Unable to sit around a moment longer, Max decides she needs to do something. "I'm going to go check on them," she whispers to Lucas.

Lucas shrugs. "Okay."

Max kisses his cheek briefly before rising out of her seat and exiting the theater.

The hallway that connects the various viewing rooms is quiet when Max steps out. The space is lit with a few sconce lamps that hang on the walls, though they don't really offer much light. The walls and floors are a ruby red that, while classy, suddenly remind Max of an evil lair she saw in a movie once.

Don't be so dramatic, Mayfield, Max chides herself.

Max makes her way down the dark corridor, headed in the direction of the lobby. Her footsteps are muffled by the plush carpeting. She passes a few of the other theater rooms along the way; the sounds of their movies filter into the hallway in a muffled, bass-resonating hum.

It's quiet.

Which makes it really easy to hear the loud thud that comes from the dark end of the hallway behind her.

Max pivots quickly, nerves spiking. She's not a scaredy-cat or

anything, but the movie has left her a little rattled. Plus, walking around a quiet, empty movie theater all alone is pretty spooky. Nevertheless, Max braces herself as she heads back the way she came, slowly making her way toward the opposite end of the hallway.

The end of the hallway doesn't have any lights, so it's hard to see what's going on at first, but as Max's eyes adjust, she can see exactly what's going on.

The loud thud was just the sound of Mike pressing El's back against the wall. She's still pressed against it as she clutches onto him tightly, standing on tip-toe to meet his level easier. Mike's got his hands on her hips as he presses himself closer to her. The popcorn bucket, still empty, has fallen to the floor and probably been forgotten entirely.

From what Max can see, they're not making out — more like trying to eat each other's faces off. It's kinda gross, actually.

Max is both shocked and not shocked at all. "*Oh my god*," She finally says, eyebrows raised and jaw slightly ajar.

Mike and El jump apart at once, moving so fast it practically looks like they were electrocuted. They turn to look at Max in shock, eyes wide and gasping breathlessly.

"M-max!" El exclaims.

"El?" Max smirks, raising an eyebrow.

Mike and El exchange terrified glances before turning back to Max.

"We were just talking!" Mike quickly explains.

"Really? In what language?" Max continues to smirk, "French?"

As Max proceeds to laugh at her own joke, Mike and El's faces flush bright red.

"God, it all makes sense now!" Max exclaims as her laughs die down, "Like, why you two have been acting like such total wastoids. It's because you thought you could actually be sneaky!"

"We were!" Mike frowns defensively, crossing his arms. The sunglasses are buried in his hair at an off-kilter angle, which really isn't helping his case.

"Really? So when did this even start?"

"Last Thursday," El admits.

"So...you guys made it like, 8 days without getting caught," Max scoffs, "So sneaky."

"Well, whatever!" Mike huffs, "You can't tell anyone!"

Max eyes him. "And why not?"

El rolls her eyes. "Because the boys don't like me, and—"

"—they'll start freaking out about Yoko Ono!" Mike finishes for her.

"So what if they do?" Max counters.

"I don't want to them to be all annoying about it!" Mike protests.

Max groans and rolls her eyes up to the ceiling. "All of you guys are being so stupid."

"Well," Mike huffs, "We wouldn't have to be if Lucas wasn't so—"

"So what?" Max frowns, giving Mike a warning look.

Mike stops abruptly. "Nothing," he mutters with a surly frown.

A moment of uncomfortable silence passes between the three of them. Off in the distance, Max can hear the sounds of a cheesy-sounding scream coming from one of the movies.

"Just, please don't tell them," El sighs, "We want to tell them when we're ready to."

Max eyes her carefully. El looks so worried, and even Max has to admit she doesn't know how Dustin and Lucas would take this news.

"Fine," Max finally huffs, "I won't tell them. But they're going to be

mad when they find out you were lying to them."

"They won't be mad and they won't find out!" Mike claims with an unusual amount of confidence.

Max shrugs before heading back into the theater. Mike and El get a new bucket of popcorn and a new box of Milk Duds before joining the others. None of the three expect that Mike's confident claim would later prove to be wrong in every sense, nor that it would prove to be wrong so soon.

Like, Tuesday's-band-practice soon.

[A/N]: Sorry for the slow update! April is my last month of school for the semester, so I've been busy. Now that I'm headed into summer break, updates should come quicker!

MANY MANY thanks to Ely, who single-handedly came up with the entire idea for the Hopper/Mike meeting. It was hilarious and I'm forever indebted to her for it. If you like Strings Attached, you'll LOVE everything she writes. Even if you just love anything, go give her the credit and attention she deserves.

Tumblr: mad-maxxy

AO3: EvieSmallwood

6. Where Everything Goes to Shit

Lucas takes a deep breath as he looks at his reflection one last time. He doesn't know why he feels so nervous about talking to Mike — they're best friends, after all, have been ever since kindergarten. And didn't they learn how to share shit in kindergarten? Wasn't that still relevant? Shouldn't Mike share the role of lead guitarist with him?

Lucas winces, hoping his upcoming speech is more eloquent than his internal dialogue. Thankfully, none of the other students passing through the school hallway seem to notice him, nor his wincing grimace.

None of them except one, apparently.

"What are you doing?" A voice interrupts.

Lucas glances over his shoulder to see Max standing behind him. She's eyeing him skeptically with her arms crossed over her chest.

"Max!" Lucas blushes, turning to face her, "Hey!"

Max quirks an eyebrow. "Why were you staring at your reflection like a weirdo?"

Lucas glances back at the glassy trophy case behind him. "Uh, no reason."

Max gives him a doubtful look. "So, you just always check out your reflection before lunch?"

"No!"

"Then what are you doing?"

Lucas hesitates, but ultimately admits, "I was practicing."

"Practicing what?"

"Talking."

"You don't know how to talk?"

"No! I mean, yeah!" Lucas stammers awkwardly, "I mean, I obviously know how to talk, but I wanted to practice what I'm going to say to someone today."

Max steps a little closer to him, looking curious. "Who are you talking about?"

For a moment, Lucas doesn't want to tell her — it feels too embarrassing somehow. But then he realizes that if he can't even tell Max, there's no way he's going to be able to tell Mike.

"Don't laugh," Lucas pleadingly begins, "But I was planning on talking to Mike while we're all having lunch right now."

"About what?"

"About how I want to take the lead during more of our songs," Lucas explains, "How I want to be able to *choose* some of our songs."

"Why would I laugh?" Max frowns, "I think it's a good idea."

Lucas blinks at her. "You do?"

"Of course!" Max nods, "He's been brushing you off like, all of the time. It's about time one of us said something."

Lucas wants to melt. Seriously, he has to have the nicest, most supportive girlfriend in the world. But turning into a mushy mess wouldn't be a good idea right now — not when he has to stand up to Mike in like, less than five minutes. So, he instead settles for pulling Max into his arms and giving her a brief, firm kiss. He can hear a few kids whooping and making kissy sounds at them as they pass by, but Lucas couldn't give any fewer shits.

When they pull back, Max is blushing as red as her hair. "What was that for?" She smiles, tucking her hair behind her ear.

"For being amazing," Lucas smiles back.

Max rolls her eyes, but continues to smile all the same. "You're such a

sap," she mutters, grabbing his hand. "Now, let's go."

They walk hand-in-hand to the cafeteria, which is as hectic as ever. As they get in the food line, they can see kids shouting out to one another, flinging food and wrappers at each other, and leaving tables without even bothering to clean up their messes.

"I hate that we have to eat in here now," Max mutters as she eyes their rowdy classmates.

"It won't be forever," Lucas reminds her, "Once the musical's over, we'll have our spot back."

"Thank god."

The pair gets their usual servings of Monday Mystery Meat before making their way over to the table their friends are sitting at.

Well, two of their friends.

"Where are Mike and El?" Lucas asks as he and Max take their seats across from Dustin and Will.

Dustin shrugs. "I dunno, they haven't shown up yet."

Max feels an anxious sort of prickle creep along the back of her neck. She has a pretty good idea what Mike and El are probably up to and having to feign innocence makes her stomach churn (though, to be fair, the stomach-churning could also be due to the meat).

God, it wouldn't be so hard to cover for them if they weren't so stupidly obvious all of the time.

"Well, they better hurry," Lucas grumbles, "I need to talk to Mike."

Will glances at him curiously. "About what?"

Lucas shrugs. "Band stuff."

The others reply with knowing nods before turning back to their lunches. Lucas uses his fork to poke his food impatiently, crinkling his nose at the moist *squelch* sound his pile of meat makes.

About ten minutes pass in a weird silence. They work away at their food, allowing the roar and bustle of the cafeteria to fill the void where their own conversations should be.

Finally, Dustin raises his head to offer, "Do you want me to go look for him?"

"Mike?" Lucas asks.

"Yeah. I mean, if you wanna talk to him. I'm pretty much done with lunch; I think that if I have to smell it any longer, I'm gonna regurgitate it all over this table."

"Oh," Will mutters, wrinkling up his nose.

"Please go then," Lucas nods hastily.

Max hesitates. Half of her wants to stop Dustin — if he finds Mike and El in a compromising position, they'd be totally screwed. The other half of her realizes that if this did happen, it'd be entirely their own fault. Max may have promised not to tell, but she didn't promise to be their freaking babysitter.

And so, when Dustin leaves the cafeteria to go look for Mike and El, Max doesn't stop him. She doesn't know that doing so would set a domino chain of events in motion, but then again, where that chain begins doesn't necessarily start with her.

Anyway, while Max, Lucas, and Will waited for Dustin to come back, Mike and El were sitting on the bleachers that overlooked the football field behind the school. They both have lunch trays on their laps and are finding their Mystery Meat just as appetizing as their friends did.

"This meat is so gross," El shivers, prodding her lunch with her fork.

"It seriously is," Mike contends, "I don't know whose idea it was to serve it every Monday."

It's a late-October day, so the temperature is a little chilly. A breeze passes through the trees, causing the browning leaves to rattle and fall. No one else is out here, which is why Mike suggested they eat here together — so they could have a little alone time together and

not be forced to avoid each other during school hours.

Another breeze passes through and Mike notices that El is still shivering. Without giving it a second thought, he removes his jacket and places it over her shoulders, enveloping her in its warmth.

El turns to him with a grateful smile. "Thanks, Mike!"

Mike smiles back. "Of course, El."

They lean in for a kiss, making sure to keep it quick. Even though they're alone out here, anyone could theoretically walk in at any time.

As they pull away, El's brow furrows. "I can't do this anymore."

Mike freezes. "What?"

El points down to her lap. "Lunch! I can't eat any more. It's gross."

"I think my mom packed some cookies for me this morning," Mike offers, "It's not much of a lunch, but—"

"Why didn't you say so before?" El gasps.

"I just remembered!" Mike blushes. He sets his lunch tray aside and starts digging through his backpack. He retrieves a ziplock bag of homemade sugar cookies and holds it out to El, dangling it tantalizingly.

"Can I have one?" El pleads, setting her lunch tray aside.

Mike eyes her carefully. "What's the magic word?"

El leans in to kiss his nose.

Mike blushes. "That's not a word," he mumbles, but opens the bag of cookies anyway.

"Give me a bite," El smiles, opening her mouth.

Mike grins as he feeds a pumpkin-shaped cookie to her. When El bites into it, orange sugar crystals fly everywhere like confetti, causing

both of them to snort with laughter.

They go through all of the cookies together, Mystery Meat entirely forgotten. After finishing, they lounge back on the bleachers, legs brushing against each other.

They stare out at the empty field. The sky is gray and gloomy; not exactly the most romantic atmosphere, but it makes for some good thinking.

"Nancy's coming home for Thanksgiving in a couple weeks," Mike says after a few moments.

"That's your college sister, right?"

"Yeah."

El looks at him curiously. "Is that a good thing?"

Mike nods. "I mean, we get along most of the time. Plus, my parents don't like to fight in front of her when she comes home for visits."

El softens. Though Mike looks nonchalant about the whole thing, she knows better. She reaches out to hold his hand and gives it a firm squeeze, causing Mike to smile at her.

"Well," El reminds him, "If you need anything, I'm here. "

Mike kisses her cheek. "I know."

They continue to sit in silence for a bit before El turns to him. "And, speaking of holidays...", she begins casually.

Mike looks back at her. "Yeah?"

"Halloween's in ten days."

"Oh?" Mike replies with a small smile.

El smiles back at him hopefully. "Are we going to do something?"

Mike pretends to think for a moment. As he does so, he casually slides a little closer to her. "I was thinking...we eat a bunch of candy,

watch some horror movies, and like, make out or something."

El's smile widens. "That's nice, but we can't make out."

Mike pouts. "Why not?"

"Everyone knows that if you do it on Halloween, you die," El shrugs, "It happens in *Halloween*."

"Then we'll just wait until midnight," Mike offers with a playful grin that makes El's heart flutter and cheeks burn.

She gives him a small nudge, hoping her flustered feelings don't show. "When did you become so slick, Mr. Walkmen?"

Mike blushes modestly. "I'm not being slick, I just...I really like you, okay?"

El smiles shyly and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. "I really like you, too."

The deeper feelings behind their words linger in the air like static electricity. They both more than just *like* each other, they're sure of that now, but neither has the guts to confess it to the other.

Mike leans in and briefly nudges her nose with his.

El knows it's dumb, but that little action just makes her fall in love a little more. That's been happening a lot lately. It's all the little things. Like, when he's driving her to school and turns to glance at her with the softest of smiles. When they're walking into school together and his fingers brush against hers one last time.

Her feelings for Mike are growing stronger by the day and it all feels like it's building to something. Maybe it's irrational, but over the past couple days, El hasn't been able to shake this *feeling* that something's about to happen. She doesn't know whether it's a good or bad thing, she can just sense it. Like when all the wind drops and the sky turns gray before a storm.

It's funny that she's thinking this, because minutes later, Dustin walks out to find them seated side-by-side and holding hands on the

bleachers. They don't notice him at first, they're too busy joking about cheesy horror movies, but then Dustin clears his throat and they freeze.

Mike and El wrench their gazes away from one another to see Dustin standing at the foot of the bleachers, only a couple feet away from them.

Well, shit.

Dustin blinks at them, looking confused, worried, and a little distrustful all at the same time. His gaze falls to their hands, so Mike and El let go of each other hastily.

Dustin's eyes narrow. "What are you guys doing out here?"

Mike and El glance at each other. "We....we were...uh..." Mike begins helplessly.

El swallows. Maybe this is that *feeling* she was getting, maybe this is what is meant to happen. First Max, then Dustin. To keep lying would be a little ridiculous at this point, so maybe they should just come clean. They can't lie forever, and she's starting to get the idea that the longer they lie, the worse off they'll be.

And so, El takes a deep breath, ready to finally tell the truth. And then—

"We knew that we couldn't sit at our spot this week," Mike finishes, "So, we decided to eat out here instead, right, El?"

Mike turns to look at her, and El feels her heart sink. She doesn't want to do this, but her mouth starts moving anyway. "Right."

Dustin still looks suspicious. "Why didn't you tell any of us?"

Mike shrugs. "I guess we forgot."

Something doesn't feel right about this. Dustin saw them holding hands, and when he walked out, he saw how close they were sitting together, how they were beaming at each other and laughing together, completely lost in their own little world. He's pretty sure

'friends' don't look at each other like that, or 'forget' to tell everyone else where they're going.

But still, this was Mike, his best friend. They wouldn't lie to each other — it was in the band's rules, after all. Mike still cared about (him) that, right?

"So, that's it?" Dustin asks carefully, looking directly at Mike, "You just came out here to eat?"

Mike holds Dustin's gaze. "That's it."

A beat of silence passes, then Dustin seems to resign. "Okay," he mutters reluctantly.

Mike feels his shoulders slump in relief. *Thank god.*

El's heart suddenly feels as if it weighs a thousand pounds. That was a mistake, she knows it was, but still, she says nothing, not wanting to get Mike in trouble.

"So, did you need something, or...?" Mike asks.

"Lucas wants to talk to you," Dustin replies, "He's in the cafeteria."

It takes everything in Mike not to groan aloud. Seriously, couldn't Lucas and Dustin get off his case for five minutes? "Can't he wait?" Mike huffs.

"I don't know," Dustin hesitates.

"Let's just go," El says to Mike, trying to sound as firm as she can, "Maybe it's important."

"Maybe," Mike mutters.

Mike and El grab their lunch trays and follow Dustin back into school. As Dustin leads the way, he tries to shake off the nagging thoughts that are starting to linger in the back of his mind.

Mike and El, showing up late together.

Mike and El, disappearing together.

Mike and El, having private guitar lessons together.

Mike and El, driving to school together.

As every thought builds up in his mind, Dustin starts to feel increasingly frantic. Either he's going crazy and jumping to conclusions, or Mike is lying to his face.

He wants to believe the former. He really *wants* to. But when he was seven he also wanted to believe that Wookiees were real, and that obviously didn't work out.

They re-enter the cafeteria and join the rest of the band at the table. Dustin sits beside Lucas and Max, allowing Mike and El to sit beside Will.

"Hi, guys!" Will smiles.

El smiles back at him. "Hi."

Lucas sits up straight in his seat, trying to seem authoritative. Mike slouches back in his own, looking bored.

"So," Mike sighs, "You wanted to talk to me?"

Max gives Lucas an encouraging nudge and nods.

Lucas takes a deep breath. "I think we should talk about the band."

Mike raises his eyebrows, though he honestly doesn't look that surprised. "Okay."

"Well, I feel like I should get some chances to play as lead guitarist," Lucas says firmly, "You're always the one who plays lead and picks all of the songs, which isn't really fair because we never agreed to that."

"Why is that a problem?" Mike mutters. Mike doesn't know why Lucas even has to bring this up all the time. Mike rightfully earned his place as the leader of their group, so why was Lucas always trying to take his place?

It's probably super lame or whatever, but considering that this band is the one thing Mike currently has control over in his life, he's not eager to hand that to someone else.

Lucas stiffens. "I just want to be treated equally. I don't think we need only one person to be the lead all of the time."

"Whatever," Mike says dismissively, "Can we please talk about something else?"

"No, I think we should talk about this," Max says tersely, "Lucas deserves a chance."

"Fine, then!" Mike huffs, "He can play lead at practice tomorrow! Happy?"

Lucas' jaw tightens. No, he's not really happy. Mike clearly doesn't see what he's doing wrong, he's just going along with it so they'll stop talking.

"Fine," Lucas manages to reply, and he's honestly amazed at his ability to keep his voice even.

"Great," Mike replies disinterestedly.

He's wearing those stupid sunglasses on top of his head again, and Lucas kind of wants to smack them off.

El glances between the boys nervously. She locks gazes with Will and sees that he's also looking pretty worried. He's rocking ever-so-slightly in his seat, not really making eye contact with anyone.

El turns to Dustin to see how he's doing, but to her alarm, he's already glaring back at her. His eyes are narrowed as if he's lost in deep, critical thought. El doesn't like it — it feels as if she's being scrutinized.

They finish their lunches in silence.

On Tuesday afternoon, everyone heads to Mike's house for band practice. It's one of those stiflingly humid autumn days — since it

rained the night before, it's sunny, but uncomfortably so. Mike has the garage door open and a fan running, but the difference it makes is minimal at most.

When Dustin arrives, Mike is helping El plug in her mic.

"Thanks," El smiles as Mike finishes, holding eye contact with him.

"Welcome," Mike smiles back.

Dustin feels his gut lurch. He forces himself to look away as he takes his seat behind his drum set and grabs his drumsticks.

Will arrives next. As he enters, he can practically see the tension crackling in the air. No one's really looking at each other or talking. Deep down in his gut, he knows that *something* is going to happen today. A part of him wants to ask Mike to cancel practice for the day — maybe they should go bowling or visit Benny's instead — but he knows it's futile. Everyone's already setting everything up, and besides, he knows they're not going to be able to avoid confrontation forever.

He just wishes it didn't have to be today.

Lucas and Max arrive last. Max's van comes to a screeching halt in Mike's driveway. She and Lucas get out, instruments strung over their shoulders.

"Hey, guys!" El greets, offering them a shy smile.

Max gives her a polite smile in return. "Hey, El."

"Alright," Mike says, clearing his throat and grabbing his guitar, "So, I guess you're in charge, or whatever, Lucas."

Lucas nods and takes his place in the center of the garage where Mike usually stands beside El. As Mike watches him, he can't help but think about how *wrong* it looks — like when a substitute teacher takes over a class for a day.

Whatever, Mike tells himself, it'll just be for like, one or two band practices. Then things can go back to how they should be.

"So, what are we playing?" Will asks.

"I wanna do *Back In Black*," Lucas states, glancing at the rest of the group, "Max and I have been practicing."

"That's great," Mike says dryly.

"You know that one, right, El?" Max asks, turning to look at her.

El nods hesitantly. "I think so. It was on the tape you guys gave me, so..."

"So, we're all set then," Lucas confirms, "Let's tune-up."

The rest of the band follows Lucas' instruction. After tuning up, they go right into practicing the song. The garage reverberates as the music pounds through the amps. El's a little rough on some of the lyrics, but the music goes by smoothly enough. When it comes time for Lucas to do his big guitar solo during the bridge, he does it with an effortless, practiced finesse that even Mike has to secretly admit is admirable.

When the song ends, Lucas is a little winded, but overall pleased. El gives him a warm smile which he returns before looking at everyone else behind him.

"Nice job!" Max smiles, "I think we sounded pretty bad ass."

"Yeah," Mike says flippantly.

Lucas grips his guitar a little tighter as he eyes Mike. "What?"

Mike shrugs. "Nothing."

"You obviously want to say something," Lucas says evenly.

Mike eyes him back for a moment before admitting, "Well, it's just that I think you messed up a few of the chords on the first verse. But other than that, it was good."

Mike's probably right, but that doesn't make his comment any less irritating to Lucas. "Well, El messed up some of the lyrics," Lucas

points out carefully, "I don't see you saying anything about that."

Mike frowns. "Because...that wasn't as noticeable."

"Or, you just don't want to criticize her," Lucas says through his teeth.

"Why wouldn't I want to criticize her?" Mike scoffs.

Dustin, still seated behind his drum set, can't help but scoff right back. "I think it's becoming pretty obvious why," he mutters, loud enough for everyone to hear.

Everyone's heads snap in Dustin's direction, though none as quickly as Mike's. "What's that supposed to mean?" Mike asks warningly.

"Isn't it obvious?" Dustin replies, glancing at him nervously. He doesn't want to say or ask it — doing so would make it more *real* somehow, but he can't stop thinking about it. *Showing up late, sneaking off, private lessons, car rides, the way they LOOKED at each other* —

He remembers how it'd only taken one look from Steve for him to assume that they were dating. As Dustin feels all this evidence pile up, he starts to realize that maybe he's an idiot for not assuming the same.

And so, Dustin takes a deep breath and finally asks it.

"Aren't you dating?"

The garage is so silent, you can hear the neighbor kids a block away playing in their backyard. All eyes move toward Mike and El, waiting to see how they'll reply.

Mike glances at El, who looks worried. He opens his mouth to dissuade Dustin and move past all of this, but El is quicker.

"We are," El answers.

"*El!*" Mike yelps, shocked.

"What!?" El snaps back, "I'm tired of lying about it, Mike! They were

going to find out eventually!"

"*I knew it!*" Dustin cuts in, "You guys were acting too weird! It's because you were lying!"

"And they're the worst liars ever," Max mutters.

Mike sighs and looks up at the ceiling. "Yeah, yeah, whatever. We're dating. So what? It's not that big of a deal."

"*Not that big of a deal?*" Dustin echoes, nearly choking, "Are you shitting me, Mike? We literally had a pact! We said El could only join the band if she didn't split us up!"

"She's not splitting us up, genius!" Mike retorts with a glare.

"Yes, she is! She turned you into a liar!"

El's jaw drops. "I did not!"

"Yes, you did!" Dustin insists, "Mike's never lied to us before!"

Lucas can't stop himself from rolling his eyes. "Oh my god, Dustin, who even cares! The problem isn't El — she's barely even a real member of this band!"

El flinches, torn between both sadness and anger at his words. "What?"

"This is about Mike!" Lucas continues, ignoring El entirely, "And how he's always being a total asshole!"

"Because of El!" Dustin insists, "She's Yoko-Onoing him!"

"No, she's not!" Mike snaps.

"Come on, Dustin," Max sighs, giving him a tired look, "This isn't like Yoko Ono. Just because you're dating someone doesn't mean the band is going to be ruined. Lucas and I are dating!"

"Yeah, but that's different!" Dustin insists, "Lucas isn't the lead guitarist like John Lennon was!"

The room falls silent at that. It feels like everyone's holding their breath, just waiting for things to explode. The tension that's been building ever since El joined the band is growing taunter and tighter with every moment, like a balloon that's about to burst.

There's silence, then after Dustin's declaration fully sets in, the balloon is popped, the volcano erupts, the dominoes come crashing down, or whatever dumb metaphor best describes the shit that follows.

"*Mike's not the lead guitarist!*" Lucas furiously erupts, "He only thinks that he is because he makes sure that he is! Every time I have an idea for a song, or wanna take the lead, he shuts me down! He controls everything and I'm sick of it!"

"I deserve to be the lead guitarist!" Mike snaps back, "Face it, Lucas! It was MY idea to make the band! We have practice at MY house! It was thanks to MY help that you even learned to play the guitar!"

"Well, don't expect us to start kissing your ass anytime soon!" Max retorts, narrowing her eyes at Mike.

"You don't even deserve to be the lead guitarist, Mike!" Dustin cuts in, "You broke the first rule! We don't lie to each other and we don't keep secrets!"

"Those rules are stupid!" Mike scoffs, "They don't even matter!"

Dustin's jaw drops in shock. "But they're *our* rules! We made them together!"

"We wouldn't have had to lie if you guys hadn't been so judgmental!" El interrupts, looking angry, "You guys were saying bad things about me behind my back!"

"Well, it's a good thing we never trusted you, because you're obviously a traitor!" Lucas scowls, "You broke the first rule, that means you're out of the band!"

"Guys, stop!" Will pleads, looking frantic, "This is stupid—"

"You can't kick her out of the band!" Mike scowls at Lucas, "Don't be

stupid!"

"Oh, I'M being stupid?!" Lucas snaps, clenching his fists.

"Yeah, you are!"

"You know what, Mike, you really can be an ass sometimes!" Max scowls, "You never let Lucas do anything!"

"That's not true!" Mike persists, "I let him take lead today!"

"Wow," Max replies sarcastically, "*One* band practice in *three* years. How *generous*."

"He doesn't care about Lucas because he was too busy trying to hook up with El!" Dustin seethes, "He cares about her more than any of us!"

"Excluding himself," Max snorts.

"See, this is why I didn't tell you guys!" Mike snarls, "I knew you'd act like total idiots about it!"

"We're your friends, Mike!" Dustin counters, and though his demeanor is still angered, there's no hiding the painful tinge to his voice, "We're supposed to come first!"

"Well, too bad!" Mike says brusquely, "You guys are being annoying and stupid!"

"Well, you know what?" Lucas huffs, "Screw this!" With an angry tug, he yanks the cord connecting his guitar to the amp. The resulting popping sound explodes loudly throughout the garage, causing everyone to cover their ears.

Will's the first to lower his hands from his ears. "What are you doing?!" He asks worriedly.

"If Mike thinks I'm so stupid and that he's the best guitarist ever, then I quit!" Lucas declares angrily, "I don't need to be in his stupid, shitty band!"

"Fine!" Mike snaps, "I don't need you, either!"

Max eyes Lucas worriedly, but her face soon hardens with a firm glare. "If Lucas is out...then so am I," she states, unplugging her bass.

Lucas and Max grab their instruments and storm towards her van. Mike keeps his guitar strap over his shoulder and crosses his arms over his chest, eyeing them bitterly.

As Lucas yanks open the passenger's side door and enters the car, Max stops and turns back towards El. "Come on, El," she mutters, "I'll drive you home."

El turns to her, completely startled. "What?"

"Let's get you out of here!" Max says, motioning for El to follow her.

El pales. This is escalating out of control. She feels like she's trying to run down a steep hill — desperate to avoid tumbling face-forward and fall the rest of the way down. "I...I don't..."

Max frowns. "You're not seriously going to stay here with *him*, are you?" She says accusingly, pointing at Mike, "You heard what he just said about us!"

El fidgets in place, not looking at either Max or Mike. "I...I don't want to have to choose between you!" she murmurs woefully.

Max's eyes narrow. "Well, it sounds like you just did." With that, she heads to her van, climbs inside, and pulls out of Mike's driveway with an aggressive screech of her tires.

After Max and Lucas drive off, the remaining four turn to look at each other.

"If El stays, then I quit," Dustin says with a firm finality. He knows he's being kind of immature about this whole thing, but his angered fear has gotten the better of him. It finally, actually happened — Mike was seriously ditching him, ditching all of them, for a girl. He was going to be left alone and forgotten and *shit*, this was turning into such a disaster—

"I'm not kicking El out of the band!" Mike glowers.

"You're seriously picking her over everyone else!?" Dustin exclaims.

"Obviously!" Mike says with an eye roll.

Dustin hates that he feels sad about this. He should be pissed off at Mike like Max and Lucas are. Instead, he just feels bitter and abandoned.

"Fine then," he mutters, dropping his drumsticks on the floor and getting to his feet, "Screw all of you guys."

Dustin hurries out of the garage, head low and posture stiff. He grabs his bike from where he left it in the driveway and takes off, not looking back.

After Dustin leaves, Mike feels himself deflate. He didn't realize that he'd been clenching his fists and his jaw so tightly shut this entire time, nor that he was shaking so profusely. He takes a breath to steady himself, trying to calm down.

He turns to look over his shoulder at Will, who's still seated behind the keyboard. "Will?" Mike asks hopefully, "You're good, right?"

"I...." Will sways in his seat, wringing his hands together. "I...I actually think I should go home," He mumbles, "I'm sorry."

El feels herself physically wilt. Will's been innocent in all of this, he doesn't deserve this. "Will...please don't," she pleads.

"I'm sorry," Will repeats anxiously. He shakily gets up from his seat, pushes past them, grabs his bike, and, just like everyone else, he leaves.

With just Mike and El remaining, the garage is deathly quiet. Mike is suddenly and starkly aware of what just happened. During the entire argument, he'd been running on nothing more than adrenaline and emotion, but now that that's all faded away, he's left with nothing more than the reality and consequence of his actions.

Well, whatever, he assures himself, *I don't need jerks like them anyway.* He's still got El, so that's all that really matters.

Mike turns to look at her with a tired sigh. "So—"

El's eyes are red and shimmering as she tries to hold back guilty tears. She's set the mic back in its stand and is clutching onto the stand like it's the only thing anchoring her in all of this. She tries to meet Mike's gaze but can't, instead giving her head a miserable shake.

Shit.

"El? You okay?" Mike asks worriedly.

"This is all my fault," El whispers in reply, "I...I ruined everything."

"No!" Mike protests. He slips his guitar strap off his shoulder and sets the instrument aside before running over to her, "It's not your fault, El! They're just being assholes!"

"They're our friends!" El exclaims, "My dad and Max were right! We shouldn't have lied to them! I-I never even wanted to lie to them! I wanted to tell them, but y-you made me lie! Y-you s-said it would be fun and n-now th-they hate me!"

As tears begin to stream down her cheeks, Mike feels his gut clench with guilt. "I-I'm sorry!" He insists, placing his hands on her shoulders, "I didn't mean for this to happen!"

"I-I just wanted friends!" El continues, "Th-that's why I joined the band! I've never had any r-real ones before and now...n-now everything is ruined!"

"We can find other friends!" Mike offers weakly, "We'll....we'll make a new band!"

"N-No!" El sniffs, shaking her head.

"No!?" Mike echoes, feeling lost. He can feel that intense, overwhelming force of emotion taking over him again, only this time it's not rooted in anger, but panicked fear.

"N-no," El repeats, wrenching out of his grasp. She turns her back to him and starts walking out of his garage, wiping at her eyes remorsefully.

Mike's eyes widen. "El, wait!" He exclaims, "Where are you going?"

"I-I need to go!" El calls back.

Mike can hear alarm bells going off in his head and feel his heartbeat in his throat. He frantically runs after El, following her out to the sidewalk in front of his house. He manages to stand in front of her, momentarily stopping her from leaving.

"*El, wait!*" He says again, desperate, scared, holding her hands tightly, "Please, *don't go!* Talk to me!"

"I can't do th-this!" El wails, not looking at him, "I-I feel terrible! Every t-time we're together, I'll j-just think about what h-happened! H-how we lost all of our friends! H-how we lied to th-them!"

"Are we breaking up?" Mike asks desperately. God, he probably sounds like such an idiot right now, but he doesn't care. There's an intense, unshakable fear coursing through his veins right now. It's making his heart pound and his hands shake and he just feels like he's about to pass out. *She's leaving — she can't leave. Please, please, please, please don't leave, please, please, please —*

"I-I think so," El stammers, not looking at him, "I-I don't know. I just need t-to g-go!"

"But I *promised!*" His voice sounds so feeble and broken, even to his own ears. "I p-promised I w-wouldn't leave you, El!"

"I know!" El whimpers, "But y-you're not! I....I *am.*"

With that, she pulls her hands away, pushes past him, and takes off running. As her shoulder brushes past his, he hears the heart-crushing sound of a choked-back sob.

He watches her go until her figure fades from view. Mike doesn't realize he's crying until he can taste the salt of his own tears landing on the corners of his mouth.

If this was a movie, it'd probably start raining. The lighting would dim, there'd be sad, dramatic music orchestrating the entire scene, and everyone witnessing it would like, cry or something.

Only that doesn't happen. It's a sunny, October afternoon. Birds are singing. Some of the neighbor kids are playing in leaf piles on their front lawns. The world keeps spinning. Life continues like nothing's changed.

It's ironic really, because Mike's pretty sure his world just ended.

[A/N] : sorry (:

7. Where Everyone Misses Each Other

As it turns out, trying to avoid the people you've been best friends with for basically your entire life is hard. Will shares four of his classes with his friends: English with Dustin, Calculus with Mike, Biology with Max, and American History with Lucas. In each class Will goes to on Wednesday, he has to avoid looking at them and sit in the back of the room. He doesn't want to do this, but it seems like there's no other option.

His (ex?) friends are still majorly pissed off at one another. He can tell because no ones talking and every time they pass each other in the hallway they just give each other glares.

Will doesn't want to be mad at any of them, but he doesn't want to take sides, either. He worries that if he does, it'll make things worse somehow. Like by hanging out with some of his friends and not others, that'll only deepen the divide between them.

In American History, they're learning about World War II and how it was fought between the Axis Powers and the Allies. Some countries, like Switzerland or whatever, were neutral.

As Will sits in class, he jokingly thinks about how he's starting to feel a lot like Switzerland right now. He turns to Lucas to let him in on the joke, but then he remembers that he's sitting in the back of the classroom, Lucas is way in the front, and they might not be friends anymore.

Right.

Surprisingly, he hasn't seen El at all. It's like she's completely turned herself invisible, concealing herself within the faceless flow of Hawkins students. Out of all his friends, Will empathizes with her the most. Sure, she'd lied to them and everything, but it was only because the other guys were being jerks.

Nevertheless, even if they had acted like jerks, Will wishes it hadn't come to this. He still misses them terribly, and without them, he feels even more exposed at school. They were the only ones who *knew*;

whether or not they were aware of it, they made him feel safer and more accepted.

During lunchtime, as Will stands in the food line, he feels more exposed than ever. This place is just way too crowded and he still doesn't know where he's going to eat. It's all disorienting and miserable.

He holds his plastic tray awkwardly, not sure of what to do with himself. As he absentmindedly turns it over in his hands, he realizes that he's been standing behind Stacy and Jennifer this entire time.

Even though they're about to get lunch, both girls are chomping away at big wads of bubblegum. The way they're chewing their gum with their mouths open makes a loud, sticky, saliva-y sound that causes Will's nose to crinkle up.

"Anyway," Stacy's saying, "I told Katie that if she really cared about Greg so much, she should have said something sooner. It's not my fault that every guy is like, into me."

Will has to stop himself from snorting. That's definitely not true.

"Oh! Speaking of which," Jennifer chimes in, "Did you hear that Dustin Henderson is into you?"

At the mention of his friend's name, Will perks up. Unable to help himself, he starts to listen more attentively to the girls' conversation, even though he's pretty sure he's not going to like where it's headed.

"Oh my god!" Stacy exclaims with a scowl, "But he's like, a total freak!"

"I don't know," Jennifer replies hesitantly, "He seems pretty nice. Nicer than Greg, at least."

"I don't care if he's freaking Gandhi," Stacy says with an eye roll, "He's still a major freakazoid. Isn't he like, mentally disabled?"

Will doesn't like confrontation, but at that, he can't stay quiet any longer. Even if he and Dustin aren't friends anymore, Dustin still doesn't deserve to get talked about like that.

"He's not mentally disabled!" Will speaks up bitterly, gripping his tray tighter.

Stacy jolts so suddenly it almost looks like she got slapped in the back. She and Jennifer turn to look at Will with a startled, confused sort of look, like he'd just spoken to them in tongues.

"Ex-cuse me?" Stacy exclaims, sounding deeply offended that Will so much as looked in her direction.

Will feels anxious but doesn't back down. He doesn't want to sit back and let bad things happen, not anymore.

"He's got cleidocranial dysplasia," Will continues, "Which affects your bones and your teeth, not your brain. But considering everyone knows you flunked Human Anatomy last year, I guess I wouldn't expect you to know the difference."

Jennifer let's out a squeak of laughter that she quickly covers with her hand. Stacy, on the other hand, does not seem anywhere near as amused. Her jaw is hanging open in shock and she looks like she just took a whiff of someone's old gym sneaker.

"What the hell?!" Stacy snaps.

"Dustin's nice," Will continues, "Way too nice for anyone like you, anyway. You'd be lucky if he liked you."

Stacy continues to blink at him before a nasty smirk settles on her face. "Oh, I'm sure you'd think that, Byers," she seethes, "I'm sure you think I'd be really lucky to have guys be into me."

Will tenses. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, everyone knows you're a queer," Stacy says with an eye roll, "Everyone's been saying it since middle school."

Will wishes he had his friends with him.

"So, if I were a freak like you," Stacy continues warningly, "I'd think twice before—"

"Hey," Jennifer cuts in, looking nervous, "Maybe like, lay off him, Stace."

Stacy turns to her, appalled. "What?!"

Jennifer chews her gum a little faster and looks from side-to-side. "I just think you're being like, a little harsh."

Stacy's jaw hangs open so wide, Will's surprised her gum doesn't fall out. She looks at Jennifer, then at Will, and then back at Jennifer again.

"Whatever!" She finally huffs, tossing her tray onto the floor melodramatically, "I'm getting out of here, I'm not even hungry anyways." She pivots on her heel and leaves the lunchroom in a huff, letting the door slam behind her.

Jennifer looks hesitant but ultimately decides to follow her friend. Before she does though, she turns back to Will with a comforting smile.

"I don't think you're a freak," she says sincerely.

Will blinks at her, completely taken aback. This whole conversation just feels too surreal and weird. He doesn't quite know how to respond, so he just nods awkwardly in reply.

With that, Jennifer picks up Stacy's tray, sets it back in its proper place, and heads out of the cafeteria.

When Will glances around, he expects everyone to be staring (*flashing neon sign, different, freak*), but to his relief, no one is. Everyone is too engrossed in their own conversations to give any care to Stacy's latest tantrum.

Will gets his food and finds an empty table in the back of the room to sit at. He runs over the previous conversation in his head, reliving the gratification of telling Stacy off, the shame of her outing him, and the confusing acceptance of Jennifer.

He's been too scared to come out to people at school — reactions like Stacy's were the primary reason why. But Jennifer...

...In a weird way, she's given him hope. Maybe some people would be understanding. Maybe he wouldn't be isolated by the entire school. Will still doesn't plan on just going around and telling everyone (he's not that naively bold), but as he mulls over it, he can at least feel some of his anxiety over the situation ebbing away.

Will softly exhales as he begins to eat. He can't help but find it ironic that Stacy and Jennifer, who didn't seem like the greatest of friends, still chased after each other to make up after a fight.

Too bad his own friends couldn't do the same.

The back of Max's van isn't the most idyllic of lunch locations, but it beats the cafeteria.

Thursday proves to be an exceptionally warm day, so as Max and Lucas sit out in the parking lot with their lunch trays, they keep the back doors of Max's van open. They sit across from each other, backs against the inner sides of the van.

Things have been tense for the past two days. Usually, whenever Max and Lucas are alone together, they have a blast. They watch dumb movies and make snarky comments on them, hang out around the arcade, or practice songs together. Now, they're just quiet. Lucas has had this perpetually irked expression on his face and Max has just felt tired — like, mentally so.

She's wearing that sky blue sweater that she bought at the mall with El. As she quietly eats her lunch (a tuna fish sandwich that's actually pretty gross), she glances down at the sweater and frowns a little.

Max would never admit it to anyone, but that shopping trip had been insanely fun. Max had even purchased one of the cringey romance novels with a promise to share the funniest bits with El, but Max currently has yet to open the book and isn't even friends with El anymore, so that kind of went to shit.

Max holds back a sigh and grinds the toe of her sneaker against the floor. She hates that she misses El. Like, El totally ditched her for Mike, and yet Max still finds herself wanting to go to the mall again

and have sleepovers and other girly shit.

A part of her worries that this is somehow her fault. Maybe she should have told the others at the movie theater. Maybe things would somehow work out differently that way. Maybe they'd be less mad and the band wouldn't have broken up. It didn't make much sense, but maybe...

Maybe, maybe, maybe.

Lucas notices that Max's sullen pout has tightened into a distressed frown. Her shoulders are tense and she keeps prodding the carpeted floor of the van with her foot.

"What's wrong?" Lucas asks concernedly.

Max looks up at him with a startled blink, as if she'd just remembered that he was there. "What?"

"You look worried," Lucas elaborates.

Max, still looking apprehensive, doesn't respond right away. She distractedly glances around the van's interior and fidgets with the remaining bit of her sandwich.

Lucas feels his gut lurch. "What is it?"

"Can I tell you something?" Max replies, sounding uncharacteristically nervous.

"Of course!"

Max takes a breath and falls quiet for another moment. The more time that passes, the more worried Lucas starts to feel. The scenarios for all the things she could possibly tell him begin to jolt through his mind at lightning speed, each growing more dramatic and nonsensical than the last.

"El and Mike told me they were dating," Max finally admits, "I mean, they didn't really tell me, I kinda just...caught them. But I still didn't tell anyone else, not even you."

Oh. Lucas feels himself loosen. His first reaction is relief, because Max isn't telling him that she's been diagnosed with a rare terminal illness that also causes amnesia and is going to result in her having to be transported to a hospital in another country where she will forget about him and like die and stuff.

Lucas' second reaction is annoyance, because who even cares about whatever the hell Mike lied about? He's not any of Lucas' concern anymore.

"Are you mad?" Max asks worriedly, and that's when Lucas realizes he still hasn't responded to Max's confession.

"Mad?" Lucas exclaims, "Why would I be mad at you?"

"Because I kept secrets from you!" Max replies, giving him a bewildered look.

"Well, that doesn't matter," Lucas huffs, "We're not friends anymore so that's all in the past. Besides, it sounds like Mike was forcing everyone to lie for him, so whatever."

Max gives a half-hearted nod in response and lowers her head again. Her messy, vibrant mane of hair hangs in front of her face, obstructing her facial expression from view.

She knows that Lucas is in the right — Mike treated him like shit, that isn't up for debate — but she still hates that everyone is all broken up now. As much as she loves Lucas, things just don't feel complete anymore.

A few moments pass in which the only sounds to be heard are the distant hum of passing cars on the main road and the energetic swells of voices filtering out of the high school.

"So, what now?" Max eventually asks, unable to keep the worry out of her voice.

Lucas glances over at her. "What do you mean?"

That's the plan, right? Making an album? Becoming famous? Playing all over the country?

Max swallows. "What's going to happen to us? I don't...I don't want to be stuck in Hawkins."

"We won't be," Lucas assures her, "We'll get out of Hawkins someday."

Though Lucas speaks confidently, it isn't reassuring enough for Max. Their plan has been blown to bits and with each day that goes by, Max feels increasingly suffocated by the prospect of settling down in some small suburban flat, having a couple of kids, and living out the rest of her days as a boring nobody.

"Maybe we should try and talk to the others," Max suggests carefully, "Maybe we could convince Mike to—"

"The only thing I want to convince Mike to do is to stay the hell away from me," Lucas interrupts bitterly.

"But—" Max grimaces, feeling frantic, breathing becoming more difficult, "I know he's an asshole, but he's still our friend."

"Was," Lucas scoffs, "He *was* our friend."

Max ultimately drops her attempts to persuade him. She's suddenly and starkly reminded of just how stubborn Mike and Lucas can be, which is kind of how this whole conflict started. As she finishes off her sandwich, she can't help but roll her eyes.

Boys.

El put in her VHS copy of *Sixteen Candles* in an attempt to make herself feel better, but it's only done the opposite. It's Friday night and as El slouches back on the living room couch with a tub of ice cream in her lap, she just feels cynical and bitter.

When Sam's crush swoops in to rescue her at the end of the film, El frowns and jabs her spoon into her ice cream.

She's never realized how unrealistic this movie is. Like, this would never ever happen in real life because romance is overrated and boys are just cute lying jerks who stomp all over your heart and ruin things and —

When the front door opens, El nearly falls off of the couch from surprise. She jolts in place, using one hand to grip the ice cream bucket and the other to grasp onto her teddy bear.

For a second, El hopes that it's Mike. Maybe he's showed up like Sam's crush and is going to apologize and make everything better again. He'll come in, clothes drenched from the rain, and scoop El into his arms and —

"Hey, kid," Hopper greets as he shuts the front door behind him.

El's daydream comes to a faltering, skidding halt. A part of her is mad at herself for even daydreaming in the first place; she's supposed to be mad at Mike, not wanting to get back together with him.

Hopper hangs up his coat and enters the living room. He glances at the TV to see Sam and her crush sharing a kiss over a birthday cake, the final shot of the film. "You're having a movie night?"

El shrugs and slumps back into the couch, bringing her teddy bear onto her lap.

Hopper comes over and sits beside her on the couch. His weight makes the couch sink in a little where he sits, and El can immediately smell the coffee and cigarette scents that seem to permanently linger around him like a familiar aura.

She wishes he wouldn't sit by her though. She's just not in the mood tonight, and she worries that she's only one too many questions away from cracking and blubbing all over the place.

"So, no Mike tonight?" Hopper asks teasingly, giving El a nudge.

Literally not even a second.

El's eyes suddenly feel very hot as a lump forms in her throat. "He works at Radio Shack on Fridays," she quietly answers.

And Mondays and Wednesdays.

Her brain is cluttered with useless facts about Mike that she now has nothing to do with. *His favorite movie is Star Wars, his favorite book is*

The Hobbit, he likes syrup on his eggs, he's never broken a bone, his favorite season is Autumn, he has freckles on his shoulders and one stray mole on his collarbone, his hair gets curly when it's wet, he owns way too many striped shirts, I was his first kiss, he might have loved me —

Useless, pointless facts that don't mean anything anymore, that only make up the fading ghost of who he was to her.

The hot tears welling in El's eyes finally begin to stream down her cheeks, though she still doesn't make a sound. Despite her efforts to be quiet, Hopper still glances over at her and sees her face.

"Hey, hey, hey!" He frowns, reaching out to wipe away her tears, "Whats wrong?"

El shakes her head wordlessly. She feels stupid. Stupid and embarrassed.

"Did something happen with Mike?" Hopper asks.

El fights back a hiccuping sniff and nods.

"You wanna tell me what happened?"

No, El thinks bitterly. In all honesty, as much as she misses Mike, she's also tired of thinking about him. She's tired of taking the bus to school, she's tired of seeing his stupid sheet music in her room, she's tired of finding random items of his around the house like his hoodie or a guitar pick, she's tired of crying over him all the time.

— And yet, she can't stop. In some sort of sadistic way, wallowing in her Mikeless-ness is the only comfort she has left.

The credits for the movie are rolling across the screen. The living room is lit only by the lamp in the corner, leaving dramatic shadows all over the room. The grandfather clock ticks slowly, methodically, counting down the dwindling minutes until midnight.

"We broke up," El hoarsely mumbles after a moment.

Hopper tenses. "Why would he break up with you?"

"No," El says again, pouting woefully, "I broke up with him." She can feel herself on the verge of tears again, so she quickly takes another heaping spoonful of ice cream.

Hopper looks hesitant, like he's not quite sure how to proceed. He tugs at his collar, loosening its fit around his neck. "So...uh...why'd you do that?"

El takes another scoop of ice cream before replying. Consequently, her response comes out in a muffled, garbled mess as she frantically speaks with her mouth full.

"My fwiends fon out dah Mwahike an I were daying because we lie to em an Mwahike yelled at em an everyone started fie-ing an then da band bro up an now everyone is mahd!"

Hopper blinks at her, looking lost. "You wanna run that by me again, kid?"

El swallows and frowns. "The band broke up!" She exclaims sadly, "They found out we were lying and Mike yelled at them and now everyone hates each other."

With that, El takes a few more spoonfuls of ice cream, bracing herself for her father's inevitable *'I told you so.'*

Surprisingly, her dad doesn't reprimand her for not listening to him. Instead, he wraps an arm around her and gently pulls her against his side. He hasn't held her like this in forever and at first El's startled.

"I remember my first break-up," Hopper begins, and though El leans into him, she finds herself cringing as well.

"Dad," she groans, not ready for another one of his high school stories, like the one from last week when he'd told her all about how he messed around with one of his girlfriends in his Dad's old car. The moral of the story, as Hopper had ultimately stated, was that you shouldn't mess around in cars — to which El had only thought, *whoops.*

"It was hard," Hopper continues, ignoring her protests, "But you learn from it. And even though it's hard, you'll move on eventually."

El feels her stomach churn. At first, she thinks it's because she's eaten almost an entire pint of ice cream, but then she realizes that it's actually because of her dad's words. *Move on?* She doesn't *want* to move on. Granted, Mike had been her first and only boyfriend, but he was amazing. She can't imagine just forgetting him and finding some other boy.

She thinks back to that night in the bowling alley, "*Well, I guess it's better off that you don't like him, since he's got a girlfriend,*" and that exact same shocked dismay takes over her once more. What if Mike starts dating someone new? All this time, El's been certain that Mike's just as torn up about their break-up as she is, but what if he isn't? What if he's already going after like Stacy or Jennifer or some other cooler girl who doesn't mess up playing *Blackbird* and would lie for him and has more friends and —

"El?"

El comes back to earth with a jolt. She turns to glance up at her Dad and sees that he's studying her face carefully, waiting for a response.

"I don't want to," El says weakly, and she sounds so whiny and childlike that she kind of hates it. "I don't want to move on."

Hopper doesn't reply, he only continues to look at her, so El tentatively continues.

"I know that he's not perfect, he was a bad friend to Lucas and he didn't let me tell the truth when I wanted to, but...I still like him. A lot. And I miss him."

She misses him. That has to be the understatement of the year.

It's kind of dumb, but she really misses cuddling him. Like, there are obviously a lot of things she misses, but cuddling is probably at the top of the list. When she closes her eyes and concentrates hard enough, she can still hear the rain drumming against the roof of the house. She can feel Mike's damp skin as his arms wrap around her. There are fresh hickeys scattered across his pale, freckled skin. His lips brush over her ear as he whispers 'goodnight.'

Hopper sighs and rubs a hand over his jaw. "Well, it sounds like he's got some apologizing to do," he states, "But that's something he's gotta handle on his own, not you, you hear me? I don't want you compromising your morals for a boy."

El nods and even though her gut still churns, she knows that her father is right in that respect. As much as she wants to be with Mike, she can't support how he treated the rest of their friends. "I won't," El assures her dad.

"Good," Hopper mumbles, giving her hair a soft ruffle. He turns his attention back to the TV, which is now silent and flickering with static, "You wanna watch another movie together?"

El blinks at him, surprised. "It's almost midnight!"

"It's not like you got school tomorrow," Hopper points out.

El continues to gape at him for a few seconds before she realizes that he really isn't joking. She then relaxes into a warm smile (her first smile in forever) before leaping off of the couch and running to look through their VHS collection. "You're amazing!" She exclaims over her shoulder as she digs through various tapes.

She left her ice cream tub behind, which Hopper is now helping himself to. As he digs into it, he looks over at her, meeting her gaze with a smile of his own.

"So are you, kid."

Mike should've known that something was up when, instead of having the usual tense Saturday night dinner that their family always shares, his parents announce that they're all going out to eat instead.

Of course, hindsight is 20/20 and the present isn't. So when his parents tell him and Holly to dress nicely because apparently they're going to a really nice restaurant, Mike doesn't think anything of it (other than *ugh, do I really have to?*)

Mike has to put on a stuffy button-up shirt that his father approves of but he personally hates. It's getting a little too small for him and hugs

his form uncomfortably, but it's the most formal shirt Mike's got.

As Mike dresses, he thinks about all the things he could be doing instead of going out to eat with his dumb parents. Practicing his guitar, reading some comics, maybe he could even try calling El up...

Mike frowns. Maybe not that last idea — El's been making a point of avoiding him all week. Mike hasn't even seen her really, and for a couple days, he worried that she might have switched schools or something.

He's trying not to think about her or anyone else, really. If he thinks about what happened for too long, his throat starts to feel light and his head starts to ache. He keeps telling himself that the less he thinks about his friends and girlfriend, the less he'll care about them.

He keeps telling himself that, but deep down he also knows that it's total bullshit.

As he finishes getting dressed and heads to the restaurant with his family, he just hopes that the dinner will get his mind off of everything that happened with his friends.

In a way, it both does and doesn't.

After all the fighting that's been going on and that phone conversation that he heard, Mike didn't expect to be shocked about hearing his parents announce their divorce. And yet, as he and Holly sit across from their parents at the suffocatingly posh restaurant, Mike feels shell-shocked.

Outwardly, he's expressionless and numb. Considering how shitty this week was, this kinda seems like a fitting way to end it. It's just as messed up as everything else in his life right now.

He wants to cry, but his dad is still sitting across from him, so he doesn't.

The finality of their parents' announcement hangs in the air like a humid fog. It makes Mike's collar feel like it's choking him even more. He feels distant, like he's watching this all happen on TV, and to other people. Everything sounds muffled, like the volume is turned

down very low. Faintly, he can hear Holly asking tear-choked questions, mainly, "B-but *why*?"

"Your mother and I just have some issues that we can't work out," Ted replies. His voice sounds stiff, as if he prepared his response.

"We just want what's best for you," Karen adds sincerely, "We don't want you to grow up with all this fighting."

Too late for that.

Mike stares down at his food — a plate of spaghetti that's hardly been touched.

"B-but where will w-we go?" Holly sniffs.

Mike feels a flash of something — fear, perhaps — momentarily overwhelm him. Where he and Holly were going to go wasn't something he'd even considered yet. He couldn't leave Hawkins — what about all of his friends?

...Not that he even had any anymore. He wants to chastise himself for worrying about them, but he can't help it; his concern for them is instinctual.

"You'll stay here in Hawkins with your mother," Ted answers.

Mike feels a small sliver of relief at that.

There are more questions and answers, but Mike hardly hears any of it. He just feels empty and lost. He wishes he could be back at Lucas' learning how to play the guitar, at Dustin's having Star Wars marathons, at the arcade with Max, drawing band logos in old notebooks with Will, or...

El's arms around him, raindrops on the window pane, sunlight, just like a fucking Hallmark card.

Mike squeezes his eyes shut tight. *Shit.*

The rest of dinner and the car ride back home are silent and miserable. As soon as they're home, Mike hurries upstairs to his

bedroom and slams the door shut behind him.

He's shaking profusely and can't stand still. As he paces around his room, a million different emotions course through him. Anger, frustration, sadness, loneliness. It all cumulates in a blind frustration that leads him to angrily yank the sheets off his bed and kick them into a pile on the floor. He's not sure why he does this, but kicking something feels incredible.

He keeps hearing his father's words, which seemed to have imprinted themselves into his memory: *your mother and I just have some issues that we can't work out.*

They have issues. They're not going to work through them. They're splitting up.

And as Mike continues to kick at his blankets, it occurs to him with a crushing horror that he's acted just like his father. He ignored Lucas and shut him out, just like any deadbeat

(father)

friend. Instead of dealing with their issues, he'd simply let their relationship fracture, shatter, and fall through the cracks.

Mike gives the blankets another kick.

"I don't need to be in his stupid, shitty band!"

"Fine! I don't need you, either!"

Kick.

God, that's not true — not even close. Mike needs his friends, now more than ever, probably. When his family is falling apart, he needs something, *anything*, to fall back on. He needs the people who have known him since he was 5 and the girl who he loves shamelessly and dangerously.

But he's lost all of them.

KICK.

At this realization, Mike breaks. He crumples to the floor and sits with his back against his bed and his head between his knees, feeling like absolute shit. His eyes are watering for the millionth time this week, though as he's alone, he doesn't try to stop himself from crying this time.

God, he'd acted like such an idiot. He was so caught up in his own shit that his worse fear became realized; he turned into the man he dreaded becoming. Deadbeat. Cold. Isolating. Leaving.

As Mike begins to whimper and snivel pathetically, a second realization dawns on him:

He doesn't want to be alone, he *refuses* to be.

In a time like now — when everything's about to change, when his whole life is about to be turned upside down — Mike knows that he needs his friends now more than ever. If his father is going to give up this easily, then *fine*, but Mike resolves himself to fight for the people he loves.

His internal monologue is interrupted by a soft knock on his bedroom door. Mike lifts his head, dreading the idea of having to talk to either of his parents right now. "What?" He calls out, voice sounding more like a croak.

"Mike?" A soft voice calls out, and to his relief, Mike realizes that it's just Holly, "Can I come in?"

Mike wipes at his eyes and clears his throat with a cough. "Of course, Holls."

The door creaks open and Holly walks in. She's wearing her pajamas and clutching her favorite stuffed pig toy under her arm. Mike can immediately tell that she's been crying too — her face is all puffy and her eyes are alarmingly red.

Holly shuts the door behind her before she begins to blink at the scene before her, looking confused. "Your bed is messy," she remarks, voice quiet and hoarse.

Mike glances down at the mess of crumpled blankets around him

before quickly rising to his feet. "Uh, yeah, sorry," he mumbles hastily, "Give me a sec."

He quickly remakes his bed, putting the sheets back on in a disgruntled manner. As soon as he's done, he sits on it carefully and motions for Holly to join him.

When Holly was five and Mike was 14, she used to have nightmares. She would come to his door in the middle of the night and plead to come in, to which Mike, well into his combative, hormonal, just-became-a-teenager phase, would crossly tell her to go bug Nancy or their parents.

Now, as Mike and his sister lie back in bed, Mike holds her in a close hug, wishing that he could somehow make all her pain go away.

Holly snuggles into him and gives a few snuffles that are muffled by his chest. One of her hands clings to the fabric of his button-up while the other still holds her pig toy.

"Are we going to be okay?" Holly mumbles after a moment.

Mike runs a hand up and down her shoulder. His gaze is trained upward, toward the glow-in-the-dark stars on his ceiling.

He doesn't know whether or not they're going to be ok. Life used to be so cut-and-dry a week ago, but now his future stretches out before him like an insurmountable, endless void.

What he does know is what he wants — friendship, love, happiness — and that he doesn't have to have the world's most perfect family to get those things, just the people he loves.

And so he holds Holly closer, kisses her forehead.

"We're going to be okay," he quietly assures her.

"Okay," Holly whispers.

They lie in silence for a long while, all of their tears spent.

As Dustin sits on the living room recliner, waiting for Steve to arrive for their usual Saturday night sleepover, he's struggling to keep this squirmy orange ball of fur in his arms.

"Mews!" Dustin whines as Mews' paws bat around wildly, "Sit still!"

Mews lets out a discontented meow in response, her face wrinkled into what looks like a pout.

"Let me love you!" Dustin pleads, but Mews only continues to squirm angrily, so Dustin ultimately releases her onto the living room floor.

"Jerk!" Dustin grumbles as Mews hurries off.

"Who's a jerk, Dusty?" His mom asks as she walks into the living room. She's wearing a satin set of pajamas and has her hair done up in so many rollers that her head looks like a beehive.

"No one, Mom," Dustin smiles, trying to hold back a laugh at his mom's appearance.

His mom gives him a curious look but ultimately shrugs it off. "Well, I'm going to head to bed," she announces, "I gotta be up early tomorrow!"

"Okay," Dustin shrugs and slumps back on the recliner.

His mom turns to leave before she stops and turns back again. "Oh! I made some gingersnaps for you and Steve! Make sure to tell him that I said 'hi'! And don't stay up too late!"

"Awesome, I will, we won't!" Dustin replies dutifully.

Claudia gives her son an appreciative smile before crossing the living room and pressing a big kiss to his forehead. Dustin blushes and is just glad Steve isn't here for this, otherwise, he'd be smirking at Dustin like no tomorrow.

After his mother retires to her bedroom, Dustin turns on the TV. Keeping the volume on mute, he flips through the channels absentmindedly, trying and failing to find anything that'll hold his attention.

He's just glad Steve is coming tonight. After this disaster of a week, a friend is exactly what he needs. So what if Mike doesn't care about him? *Steve* does, and Steve's way cooler than Mike anyway. So what if he lives 2 hours away and only gets to see Dustin every couple weeks or so? It's still better than the jerky friends Dustin has here in Hawkins.

Thankfully, he doesn't have to wait much longer for Steve to arrive. About 10 minutes into channel surfing, Dustin hears the rumble of a car and sees the familiar glow of headlights shine through the house's front windows. He gets up from the recliner and bounds toward the front door, literally bouncing with excitement. Dustin swings the front door open and looks out into the evening, smiling as Steve slings his backpack over his shoulder, tucks his sleeping bag under his arm, and locks his car.

"Steven!" Dustin calls out with a wave.

"Dustopherson!" Steve calls back with a little salute.

Dustin grins and holds the front door open for Steve, allowing him to enter more easily. "My mom says 'hi' and she made cookies," he says as Steve enters and sets his stuff down on the floor, "Also she's asleep."

"Sweet," Steve replies, already moving to grab a handful of cookies from the kitchen. He returns with one gingersnap in between his teeth and another one in his hand for later, "Your mom's cookies are the best," he says, voice muffled by the cookie in his mouth.

"*Your* mom's cookies are the best," Dustin replies with a snort.

"My mom's cookies taste like cardboard," Steve says, finally removing the cookie from his teeth so he can bite out of it normally, "Like cardboard and dogshit, man."

As Steve finishes his cookies, Dustin bursts out laughing, not because Steve's comment is particularly hilarious, but because he's just so relieved to be hanging out with someone again. His current happiness is relieving him from every lunch he had to eat underneath the stairs, every bike ride he had to take alone, and every friend he had to

avoid.

"Anyway," Steve continues, sounding oddly focused, "I got some big news for ya', kid."

Dustin looks up at him curiously. "What?"

Steve uses his free hand to dig into his pocket. He retrieves a folded-up piece of bright orange paper and holds it up to Dustin. "This."

"Paper," Dustin replies dryly, "That's incredible, Steve."

"Read what's on it, dipshit," Steve gripes, batting Dustin on the head with the paper before handing it to him.

Dustin takes the paper from Steve and unfolds it. The paper reveals itself to be a flier that looks like it was handwritten and then photocopied. It features doodles of little ghosts and music notes everywhere, but that's not what catches Dustin's eye — it's what the flier actually says.

Indiana U Halloween Boo-sic Fest. 10 pm - 1 am, Halloween Night, Central Quad. Costumes optional, free keg, 6 musical acts. Come get sheet-faced!

Dustin re-reads the flier a couple times over before responding. "....Do you...do you mean...."

"I signed you up!" Steve grins, holding out his arms in a small *tad-dah!* gesture. "I mean, right now you guys are just listed as TBA, since you don't have a band name, which you nerds really should get on..."

Dustin's jaw drops. "This....this...this is AWESOME!" He exclaims, unable to think of any better words to describe the earth-shattering shock and happiness he feels right now. A music fest! With older kids! Halloween!

"I mean, it's not like you're going to be getting paid or anything," Steve reluctantly adds, "But—"

"*Holy shit!*" Dustin beams, eyes wide. "It's an actual gig!"

"It's not a real gig!" Steve cuts in, "They're not paying you and there's gonna be like 5 other bands there—"

"Our first real gig!" Dustin continues excitedly, "Holy actual *shit!* When I tell everyone else, they're going to be so—"

... *Wait.*

Dustin pauses mid-sentence as the reality of his current situation with his friends hits him with full force. He feels his excitement deflate as quickly and limply as a popped balloon. He physically wilts as he remembers that their band is no more.

"What is it?" Steve asks curiously, eyeing Dustin's troubled stance.

Dustin's shoulders slump as he averts his gaze. "We can't play the show."

"Why not?!"

"Because!" Dustin huffs, "The band broke up!"

"*What?*"

"You heard me," Dustin grumbles as he trudges over to the recliner and sinks back into it, already feeling exhaustion start to settle in, "Everything went to shit and now we're done."

Steve blinks at Dustin for a moment before he moves to sit on the couch beside the recliner. He sits for a minute or so, staring at the silent TV with a dumbfounded expression. Then he turns back to Dustin, seemingly annoyed and confused all at once. "You know how many strings I had to pull to get you guys into this show? Why the *hell* did you guys break up?"

"Don't get all mad at me!" Dustin snaps, "It was all El's fault!"

"How?!"

"She Yoko-Onoed Mike! Just like I said she would!"

"*How?*"

"She and Mike started secretly dating and they lied about it to us! Even though I made Mike promise that he wouldn't date her! Then when I found out they were actually dating I called them out and Mike said he'd pick me over her and the band broke up! It's all her fault!"

Steve gives Dustin an incredulous look. "The hell it is!" He scoffs.

Dustin's jaw drops for the second time this night, though for an entirely different reason than the first. "What do you mean?!"

"You shouldn't have told Mike not to date her if he obviously liked her," Steve explains, "You basically forced them to lie to you, then got mad when they did."

Dustin blinks at Steve speechlessly, unable to think of a proper retort. "B-but...but...but they..."

"Why didn't you want them to even date?" Steve continues, "You didn't even know the girl! Did you like her or something?"

"No!" Dustin nearly chokes.

"Then why the hell did you try to control everything?"

"I didn't!"

"It sounds like you did! So, why?"

Because I've been back at school for like, five minutes, and things are already going to shit.

Because it's just that we agreed it wouldn't be a good idea. Because we don't really know her, and if you guys broke up it'd be really awkward, and...and you said you weren't going to like or date her...

Because Mike's obviously picking her over everyone else.

Because I've been left behind.

"Because!" Dustin exclaims, and when his voice cracks he realizes he's about to cry like he's a stupid whiny baby or something, "Because I

don't want to be the last one!"

Steve frowns. "The last one?"

Dustin wipes at his eyes, refusing to let himself full-on cry in front of Steve. "Mike and Max already have cars and can drive, while I still have my stupid bike, and now Lucas and Mike have girlfriends and Stacy thinks I'm a loser, and everyone's growing up and moving on without me and no one cares about me anymore!"

Steve's abrasiveness disappears and he instead frowns at Dustin concernedly. "That's not true."

"Yes, it is!" Dustin sniffs, crossing his arms over his chest and sinking lower in his seat, "Mike literally said he'd pick El over me! Plus, I'm the only one of my friends that's not dating, except for Will, but that's only because he's still not out yet, so he can't."

"Well, you shouldn't have forced Mike to pick El over you," Steve points out, "He shouldn't have to pick between his girlfriend and his friends, he should be able to have both."

"Still," Dustin pouts.

"And you shouldn't let your jealousy get in the way of your friends' happiness," Steve adds, "I know it sucks feeling lonely, but that doesn't give you the right to try and drag everyone else down."

Dustin hates that Steve is right all of the time. He wants to argue more, to be *right* and justified in his actions, but he knows it's futile. Also, he's just really tired of feeling angry and bitter all of the time. He lets out a heavy sigh and feels something — resentment, envy, paranoia — lift away with it. "I know," he admits.

They're silent for a few moments, both dwelling in their own thoughts. The TV continues to play on mute — it's some soap opera that Dustin thinks he overheard El talking about one time.

"Listen, I know how you feel," Steve sighs, breaking the silence.

Dustin eyes him with surprise. "You do?"

"When Nancy and Jonathan started dating, I felt kind of left out," Steve explains, looking somewhat sheepish, "I felt like a third wheel around them and shit. But I got over it, and we're all still friends, okay?"

"But that's different," Dustin pouts, "You don't have anything to worry about. Girls *love* you."

"Well, *yeah*," Steve shrugs, "But you don't got anything to worry about, either."

Dustin snorts. "Yeah, right."

"I mean it!" Steve insists. He snaps his fingers twice, signaling for Dustin to look him directly in the eyes, which he does. "Listen to me. You're awesome. You're stupidly smart, like smarter than me, even. And you're funny — you make me laugh all the time. But what's most important is that you *care*. You're not the kind of guy that's just going to jump from girl to girl without giving a shit. That's important, man."

Dustin feels his cheeks grow hot, not used to such vocal affirmation from someone that isn't his mother. He wants to say something but finds himself bashful and speechless.

"You just got to stop going after girls that don't care about that shit," Steve continues, "The ones that only care about looks and popularity and all that. If Stacy thinks you're a loser, then she doesn't deserve you, you hear me?"

Dustin's pretty sure his whole face is red now. "Okay," he mumbles, smiling shyly.

There's a soft *meow* as Mews treads back into the room. She gives them both a look before leaping onto the couch and situating herself in Steve's lap. Dustin once joked that Mews had a huge crush on Steve, to which Steve made a not-so-clean joke that had Dustin laughing for days afterward.

As Steve starts to pet Mews affectionately, he gives Dustin another serious look. "I think you should talk to them. Like, all of them."

Dustin sits up a little straighter, both intrigued and worried about that idea. "I don't know..." he mumbles, "Everyone's so mad, we haven't even talked to each other all week."

"So, take the first step," Steve shrugs, "Someone's gotta do it."

"But what if they don't want anything to do with me?"

"Trust me, they will. They're probably all just as mopey as you are right now."

Dustin sighs nervously. He takes off his baseball cap and runs a hand through his hair as he weighs out his options here. His friends are all mad at each other. Nobody wants to talk to each other. But...

...they also just might all miss each other, too.

Also, they kinda have a gig.

"So, what's it gonna be?" Steve asks, watching Dustin carefully, "What are you going to do, man?"

Dustin takes a deep breath. He knows exactly what he has to do.

"I'm gonna get the band back together."

8. Where Dustin Gets the Band Back Together

Dustin decides to start the band reunification with Will since, in theory, he'll probably be the least mad.

On Sunday afternoon, Dustin bikes to Will's house, knocks on the front door, and is greeted by Joyce. She's wearing an apron that's covered in flour and though her hair is pulled back, it still manages to look messy and unkempt.

"Dustin!" She smiles, resting a hand against the doorway, "What's up, bud?"

Dustin smiles back. "Hey, Mrs. Byers, is Will home?"

"No, he took off about an hour ago," Joyce replies, "I think he said he was going to the movies?"

Dustin frowns. "All by himself?"

Joyce shrugs her shoulders with a huff. "I guess so. He's been going there a lot lately, maybe he wants to go into film like Jonathan."

Dustin pouts, primarily because the bike ride to Will's house is kinda super long, and to go from Will's house to the theater is going to be even longer. Also, he can smell the scent of baking cookies drifting out of the Byers' house, and he realizes that he's also super hungry.

"*Son of a bitch*," Dustin grumbles, shuffling his feet, "You mean I gotta bike all the way downtown?"

Joyce gives him a reprimanding look for his language, but nods. "Looks like it."

Dustin sighs and turns to go, but Joyce stops him.

"Here, Dustin, before you go —" she ducks into the house and returns with a small baggie of cookies for him. "I don't want you biking on an empty stomach."

Dustin beams at her. "Have I ever told you that you're like, the best

mom ever?"

Joyce smiles back and snorts. "What about your mother?"

"Have I ever told you that you're the *second* best mom ever?"

Joyce gives him a teasing grin and hands the cookies over. "Goodbye, Dustin," she replies patiently.

Dustin gives her a final wave before heading back to his bike. He slips the cookies into his backpack, readjusts his baseball hat, and takes off. The afternoon is chilly even though the sky is blue. As he bikes down side-roads and secret shortcuts, he tries to plan out what he's actually going to say once he finds Will. Like, *hey, sorry I didn't listen to you. Please join the band again*. It just seems way too...lame. He needs to give it a little more *oomph*.

The bike ride feels like it takes forever. When Dustin finally makes it to the Hawk Cinema, he has to wait outside for several minutes just so he can catch his breath. He probably shouldn't have exerted himself so much by biking so fast, but whatever. He couldn't help wanting to see his friend *right away*, especially when said friend, as well as all of his friends, has been ignoring him for nearly a week now.

Dustin parks his bike beside Will's in the alleyway and heads into the movie theater. It's pretty quiet, considering it's noon on a Sunday, but that actually turns out to be a good thing as it makes it super easy to spot Will, as he's one of the only people in the lobby. He's standing in line for the concessions, drumming his foot nervously.

Dustin beams. "Will!" He calls out.

Will flinches in surprise before he glances around the lobby and spots Dustin. "Dustin!" He beams before his smile falters and he glances around nervously, "Dustin, what are you doing here?"

Dustin hurries up to him and joins him in line, ignoring the ruffled huffs of the people behind Will in line. "I came for you!" Dustin exclaims. He pauses and glances around the lobby. "What are *you* doing here?"

Will blushes a delicate shade of pink and begins to sway on the spot. "No reason," he says, but his eyes betray him as they fleetingly move toward the head of the concession line.

Dustin looks in that direction and sees the same guy that helped them out the last time he was here. He remembers how flustered and blushy Will had gotten that night, and though he didn't think anything of it at the time, it all makes sense now.

"*You like him?*" Dustin exclaims in a whisper that's pretty much audible to anyone within a five-foot radius of them.

"*Shhh!*" Will hisses, slapping a hand over Dustin's mouth. He glances toward the concession stand one more time before yanking Dustin out of the lobby and back outside. The two boys come to a stop outside in the alleyway, beside their parked bikes.

"Sorry!" Dustin hastily apologizes as soon as Will removes his hand.

"He can't know that I like him!" Will insists, still glancing around their surroundings as if he expects his crush to spring out of the dumpster further down the alleyway, "I don't want to weird him out. I don't know if he's even...*you know.*"

Dustin nods understandingly. "I'm sorry," he says again.

Will nods back and glances down at his feet, his frustration deflating and leaving him looking quite sheepish.

For an awful moment, Dustin feels a flash of that old, familiar feeling coming back again. That *last one! left behind! no girlfriend!* feeling. It churns in his gut like an old stomach ache, but Dustin takes a breath and forces himself to push it all aside. "Well, for what it's worth, Will, I hope it works out," he says, truly meaning it.

Will looks up at him, seeming both touched and surprised. "Thanks, Dustin," he says rather blankly.

Dustin gives him a small smile and averts his gaze. There's a solid minute of uncomfortable silence that settles over the pair as they both remember that they're not supposed to be friends anymore. There are the sounds of passing cars, their own shuffling feet, and

muffled amiable chatter from down the street. A breeze drifts down the alley, causing Will to zipper his jacket shut.

"So, why did you come here?" Will asks quietly, "I thought—"

Dustin gives him an uneasy smile. "Yeah, I know, we all fought and stuff, but..."

Alright, this was it. He needed to totally win Will over so he could get the rest of his friends back. This is what he'd been practicing for, it had to be the best apology ever.

But when Dustin looks at Will and opens his mouth to continue, all coherent thought just falls right out his head and lands at his feet. His brain suddenly feels impossibly empty and all he knows is that *holy shit* he's missed his friends so much.

"I want to be friends again!" He whines, "I want the band back together!"

So much for *oomph*.

Will gives him a hesitant look. "I want that too, but—"

"And we need to get back together because Steve booked us a gig!" Dustin hurriedly continues, not liking the sound of that *but*, "It's at Indiana U and it's at this big party and it's this Thursday so we need to hurry!"

"That's...that's really great, Dustin! But—"

"A-and this could be our shot you know? Like the gig that gets us started! And I obviously can't do it alone and—"

"*Dustin!*" Will finally erupts. His voice is so brash and authoritative, so out-of-character, that Dustin can't help but come to an abrupt halt, "I need to say something!"

Dustin clamps his mouth shut and nods quickly.

Will takes a breath, clenches and unclenches his hands, and looks Dustin directly in the eye. "Listen, Dustin, what you did *sucked*," he

says with a glare. It's the angriest Dustin's ever seen him and the sight is so alarming that Dustin can't do anything but stare back at him blankly.

"You *and* Lucas, actually," Will continues sternly, "With all your dumb rules and how you treated El. Do you know how much it sucks to have to pretend like you don't like someone? To have to hide your feelings all the time? It's horrible! And you guys put Mike through all this drama just because you didn't want to accept El! I know Mike didn't act perfect either, but—"

"I know!" Dustin cuts in, finally regaining the ability to speak, "I know, okay? I overreacted and I'm sorry. I really, *really* am! But I'm trying to make things right and I can't do it without you!"

Will gives him a reproachful look, still not convinced.

Dustin sighs and actually takes a moment to collect his thoughts before speaking this time. "I know that what I did was wrong," he finally admits, "I was just jealous, okay? I saw that Mike was getting a girlfriend and I felt left out and I knew it was selfish but I didn't care. El never did anything and I assumed that she was going to Yoko-Ono the band but in the end, I Yoko-Onoed the band because I tried to control everything and I'm just *really, really, really* sorry, okay? I don't want the band back together just because of the gig, but also because I miss you guys! Having to go all week ignoring you all was horrible and it sucked so bad and I felt like shit the whole time. You're my friends and I need you, all of you, even El." He finds himself out of breath again once he's finished speaking, but that's okay because he finally feels like he's gotten everything off of his chest once and for all.

Will studies him, not saying a word.

Dustin shifts in place anxiously. He feels like he's in English class or something, about to be graded on an oral presentation.

Finally, after what feels like what could have been either a few seconds or a few thousand years, Will rewards Dustin with a warm smile. "Good," he says simply.

"Good?" Dustin replies hopefully.

Will's smile widens. "That's really good. I think you're actually sorry about what you did, and it sounds like you're willing to make things up."

Dustin nods wholeheartedly. "I am, I really am! I'm more sorry than I've ever been about anything in my entire life!"

"I believe you," Will assures him.

"So, you'll rejoin the band?"

Will nods. "I missed you guys too," he admits bashfully, "Like, every day."

Dustin grins for the first time in a long time. He claps Will on the back before pulling him to a tight hug. "Thank you, thank you, thank you!" He exclaims.

Will yelps in surprise but begins to laugh as Dustin lifts him off the ground and continues to hug him. "You're welcome!"

After a few more seconds, Dustin plants Will back on his feet and readjusts his cap. "I still need to talk things out with everyone else, but I was hoping you could help me."

Will smiles. "Of course I'll help!"

Dustin smiles back before glancing toward the theater. "Did you want to finish seeing your movie?"

Will looks hesitant for a second but ends up shaking his head dismissively. "No, I can always come back later. Besides, I've already been here 3 times this past week —" His voice comes to an abrupt halt as his eyes widen and his cheeks redden. "I mean, I haven't, like, you know, uh, been here *that* many times..."

"No worries," Dustin shrugs with a teasing smirk, "Your mom already told me that you're like, obsessed with coming here now."

Will's eyes nearly bug out of his head. "She *what?!?*"

"Now come on!" Dustin continues, grabbing his bike from where it's leaning against the alley wall, "We've got some making up to do!"

The boys decide to head to Mike's house next, as Will points out that Lucas probably won't want to rejoin the band unless Mike is there to talk things out.

Thankfully, the bike ride from the theater to Mike's house isn't as long as the one to Will's.

But it's still *long*.

"We really need to get cars," Dustin huffs as he and Will come to a stop in the Wheeler's driveway.

Will, feeling thoroughly winded, nods. "Agreed. We need money though."

The boys place down their kickstands, demount their bikes, and begin walking side-by-side toward the Wheeler's front door.

"Hey, maybe you could get a job working at the theater," Dustin suddenly suggests, turning to grin at Will.

Will feels his face burn with a bashful embarrassment. "Dustin!" He hisses, though internally he has to admit it isn't that bad of an idea...

"I'm just *saying*," Dustin replies in a sing-songy voice.

"Hey, maybe you should sing for the band," Will teases back, "You sound *great*."

Dustin pulls a face as he nudges him, to which Will nudges him right back. At this interaction, Will feels a surge of happiness settle within him. He didn't realize just how much he missed having friends to joke around with until now.

He and Dustin reach the front step and ring the doorbell. A minute or so passes as the boys awkwardly wait on the front step, and just when they start debating whether or not they should ring it again, the door swings open to reveal a ruffled-looking Ted Wheeler.

"What's going on?" Ted asks in a voice that reminds Will of the narrators in all those old, boring history documentaries they have to watch in class sometimes.

"We're here to see Mike!" Dustin replies eagerly.

Ted shakes his head. "He's not home."

Dustin's face drops instantly. "What the shit?" He snaps, "Why is no one home today?"

"Language!" Ted snaps back.

"What Dustin *meant* to ask," Will cuts in, throwing his friend a glare, "Is where Mike is."

Ted eyes them both grumpily before replying, "He took Holly to the park."

Will hesitates. "Did he go with El?"

Ted frowns. "What's El?"

Dustin rolls his eyes. "Never mind, we're outta here."

"Humph," Ted replies disinterestedly before shutting the door.

"Man, Mike's dad is the worst," Dustin gripes as he and Will return to their bikes, "And that's coming from someone who doesn't even have one."

"Same," Will contends dryly.

The boys head to the park where, indeed, Mike's decided to spend the day with Holly. It was either that or spend his Sunday ignoring the way his parents are now ignoring each other. While they've stopped fighting, their silence is somehow louder and more unbearable. It hangs in the air and makes everything feel cloudy and gray inside their home.

So yeah, they needed to get out of the house.

Mike's pushing Holly on the swing set. As she moves back and forth, her pigtails fly out in the air like big, floppy ears. Bundled in her puffy parka and hat, she kinda looks like a pink marshmallow, which makes Mike wanna laugh.

"Higher!" Holly squeals, kicking her legs. Being seven years old, Holly's more than capable of swinging herself, but when she'd looked up at him with her innocent little doe eyes and pleaded for Mike to push her, how was he supposed to say no?

Especially after all the shit that happened last night...

Mike swallows and pushes the thought aside. Yesterday was yesterday, today is today, and today he's going to focus on having a good time with his sister. His parents' problems aren't his own.

Mike gives Holly another push and makes himself smile. "If I push you any higher, you're gonna go over the pole!" He teases, only half-kidding.

"That'd be cool!" Holly gasps.

"Not when you end up in so many casts you look like a Mummy."

"You look like a Mummy!"

"Do not!"

"Do too!" Holly calls over her shoulder, "You're white and bony!"

Mike lets out a bark of actual, genuine laughter. "That's it!" He exclaims before he stops pushing Holly and brings her swing to a swaying stop. Ignoring her exclamations of protest, he lifts her into his arms and begins tickling her profusely.

"N-No!" Holly squeals between keens of laughter.

"I got you!" Mike teases, tickling her stomach.

"L-let go of m-me, you m-mummy!" Holly exclaims breathlessly.

"Mike?" A new voice calls out, interrupting them.

Mike pauses and looks up to see Dustin and Will crossing the playground, heading in his direction. He feels his heart skip a beat and for a second he starts to smile (*Friends! Here! They came back for me! They care!*). But then he feels his heart drop to his feet as quickly as it skipped because, *oh yeah*, he kinda treated them like jerks, and Will and Dustin are probably just here to get their instruments back, which are still in his garage.

Mike sets Holly down as the boys come closer. "Hold on a minute," he tells her.

"Why?" Holly frowns, suddenly seeming on edge, "Weren't they mean to you?"

And now Mike's starting to regret telling her about everything that happened in the band while they were snuggling in his room last night. In his defense, it was a highly emotional time and Holly's an extremely good listener.

"*Shh!*" Mike instructs just as Dustin and Will finally reach them.

"Shh, what?" Dustin asks skeptically.

"Nothing!" Mike replies quickly.

Dustin and Will give him puzzled looks, followed by a brief period of silence. As Mike stands in front of them, fidgeting with the hem of his coat, he finds himself wondering who's supposed to be saying something right now.

"If you guys want your instruments," Mike eventually blurts out, "They're in my garage. We can go back and get them right now if you want."

"Huh?" Will frowns.

"Dude, no," Dustin snorts, "That's not why we're here."

Mike tries to ignore the hopeful skip of his heartbeat. "It's not?"

Will gives Dustin a look and a nudge, to which Dustin steps forward and looks at Mike sincerely. "We — *I* wanted to say that I was sorry."

"Good!" Holly pipes up.

The boys turn to look down at her in surprise, all kinda having forgotten that she was there.

"You guys hurt Mike's feelings!" Holly continues crossly, "He told me! Now he'll never get another girlfriend again 'cause he's not cool enough!"

"WHAT," Mike yelps, cheeks crimson, "I...I never—"

Dustin has to hold back a laugh as he turns to look at Mike incredulously. "Dude! You told everything that happened to your little sister?"

Mike blushes even redder but crosses his arms over his chest in an attempt to seem tougher. "Well, who ELSE was I supposed to talk to?" He grumbles, looking toward his feet.

Dustin and Will glance at each other, both looking quite guilty. "Yeah, I'm sorry about that," Dustin mumbles, "I'm sorry about the fight. What I did was super immature — trying to make you not date El. I was just...jealous and shit."

Mike glances up at him, alarmed. "You were jealous of *El*?"

"Not like that!" Dustin quickly explains, "Ew, no! I mean, I was jealous that a girl liked you and no girls in school ever even pay attention to me. I hated feeling like I was going to be the last one in our friend group to get with someone. Plus, I felt like you weren't going to need me anymore after you got with her."

"Oh," Mike replies. He processes this for a moment before he takes a deep breath and looks Dustin directly in the eye. "Listen, Dustin, it wasn't all your fault. I treated you guys like jerks and then I lied right to your face. I broke our rules and I was wrong, okay? I *do* need you guys."

Dustin gives him a hopeful look. "Really?"

"Obviously!" Mike smiles, "No one could ever replace you, Dustin! Who else am I going to watch Star Wars with or plan out D&D

campaigns with? Plus, you're the best drummer I've ever seen."

Dustin blushes modestly. "That's bullshit, Mike."

"It's true!" Mike contends.

"It's true," Will smiles, giving Dustin a playful nudge.

"I've never seen you drum," Holly remarks, "So, I don't know."

"*The point is*," Mike continues, eyeing Holly, "No matter what happens with any girl, you guys will always be my best friends. And I promise that from now on I'm not going to shut you guys out anymore."

Dustin's not going to like, cry in front of Mike, even though he kinda feels like doing so. Instead, he breaks out into a grin and pulls Mike in for a tight hug. Will joins in and soon the three of them are embracing each other, leaving Holly trapped in the middle.

"Get off!" Holly squeaks, voice muffled, "You're crushing me!"

The boys pull apart with a series of laughs, causing Holly to look annoyed.

"Dumb boys," she grumbles, brushing herself off.

Mike idly pats the top of her head before looking back up at his friends. "So, what now?" He asks, "Where's everyone else?"

"We still haven't talked to Lucas, Max, or El yet," Will explains, "We were hoping that you would help us out."

Mike nods nervously. "Yeah, totally."

"Then let's go!" Dustin beams.

"Right now?"

"Yes, right now! Unless you wanna ride the merry-go-round a few more times."

"No!" Mike blushes and nudges Dustin as the four of them begin walking back to Mike's car.

"Can you drive us?" Will asks.

"Our legs hurt," Dustin whines.

"I mean, I guess, since I'm already babysitting," Mike teases.

All three of the others in attendance take great offense to this.

Before the boys head to Lucas', Mike drops off Holly at home. He feels kinda awful leaving her behind, but the only other alternative would be to cart her around and have her awkwardly listen in on all his apologies, which they both agreed would be weird.

Well, okay, *Mike* thought it would be weird. Holly was more than thrilled at the prospect of getting to meet Mike's (ex) girlfriend, which just further emphasized the whole not-gonna-happen-ness of the situation.

After dropping off Holly and the bikes at the Wheeler's home, the boys decide to walk over to Lucas' house. It's Sunday evening, the sky is pink and orange, and the air is cool enough for them to only need light jackets. As they draw closer to Lucas', Mike finds himself growing increasingly nervous about what he's going to say to make things right between them.

As if reading his mind, Dustin glances over at him and asks, "So, what are you going to say to Lucas?"

Mike buries his hands in his pockets and shrugs. "Honestly, I don't know. I'm pretty sure he hates me."

"I'm sure he doesn't *hate* you," Will replies civilly.

"More like, he just can't *stand you*," Dustin elaborates.

Mike throws him a flat look. "Gee, thanks, Dustin."

"I'm just trying to be realistic!" Dustin defends, "If you go in acting all buddy-buddy, he'll probably just be even more annoyed."

"I guess you're right," Mike admits.

"I know we're almost there," Will hesitates, "But maybe we should get El first? I mean, Lucas was kind of mean to her, I think she should be here for this..."

"Yeah, where is El?" Dustin asks curiously, "Is she doing okay?"

Mike feels a sharp jab of *something* hit him right in the gut. Bitterness? Remorse? Heartbreak? Some other sappy, mopey emotion that he desperately wants to get over already?

"El's busy," Mike mutters, desperately trying to keep his voice flat and emotionless, "And besides, like you said, Will, we're already here, so there's no point in turning back now."

Will looks a little wary but nods silently. At this point, the boys reach the Sinclair residence and are happy to see Max's van parked in the driveway.

"Finally!" Dustin huffs, "Someone's actually home for once!"

Mike and Will snort as Mike leads the way up to the front door. As he comes to a stop in front of the doorway and rings the doorbell, Mike finds that his heart is beating faster and his palms have gotten all gross and clammy. *Why* is he so nervous about this? Lucas is (was?) his best friend. Talking to him should be totally normal.

And yet —

Mike can't get over his own actions. Being snarky about Lucas' playing, shutting out Lucas whenever he tried to confront Mike, never letting him take lead...he keeps playing everything that happened between them over and over in his mind, like how your life is supposed to flash before your eyes when you're about to die. In Mike's mind, this makes sense, as he wouldn't be surprised if Lucas literally kills him for this. He kinda deserves it.

The door swings open, revealing Lucas' little sister, Erica. Her hands are planted on her hips and she's looking up at the boys like they're Mormons or trying to sell her a cable TV package.

"What are *you* doing here?" She asks, crinkling up her nose in disdain.

After years of hanging out with Lucas, Mike's discovered that the best way to deal with his sister is to not give into her...prickliness. Lucas always freaks out over her behavior, which only eggs her on, which leads to the rest of the bandmates awkwardly sitting on Lucas' living room couch while they go back and forth at each other.

"Is Lucas home?" Mike asks patiently.

"Nope," Erica replies disinterestedly.

"But that's Max's car in the driveway!" Dustin exclaims.

"No, it isn't!" Erica contends.

"Yes, it is!"

"No, it isn't!"

"Yes, it is! I've literally seen it a *million times!*"

"Can we just PLEASE talk to Lucas?" Mike pleads, raising his voice to be heard over Dustin and Erica's bickering.

"Can you PLEASE leave?" Erica counters, "I don't wanna catch your *nerd* disease."

"There's no such thing as nerd diseases!" Dustin snaps.

"Dustin," Will says in a tone that pleads *please-stop-pulling-a-Lucas-and-arguing-with-the-middle-schooler.*

Just as Erica's opening her mouth to fire off another remark, Lucas appears at her side, nudging past her. "Erica, who the hell are you —"

His voice comes to an abrupt halt as his eyes land on Mike, Dustin, and Will. Mike would never admit this to Lucas, but it's in this moment — when Lucas crosses his arms over his chest and scrunches up his face into a scowl — that Mike can see the family resemblance between him and Erica more than ever.

"Hey, Lucas!" Mike begins cautiously, "I just wanted to —"

"Save it," Lucas scowls with a dismissive huff. He steps in front of Erica to shut the door, but Mike thrusts himself forward and wedges himself against the doorframe. The side of the door consequently slams against his side, but Mike chooses to ignore this.

"I just wanna talk!" Mike pleads.

"Please let us in!" Will adds hopefully.

"We've been biking all day and I need to sit down before my legs fall off!" Dustin insists.

Lucas glares at Mike but ultimately steps aside. "Whatever," he grumbles.

Erica rolls her eyes and retreats to her room, muttering something about how they're acting like a bunch of babies.

"Thanks," Mike smiles as he and the boys enter.

Lucas ignores him and leads them over to the living room, where Max is watching TV on the couch. From the looks of it, they're in the middle of one of the *Indiana Jones* movies.

Max turns to look at them as they enter, her face settling into an uncertain frown. Lucas moves to sit beside her on the couch while the other three boys awkwardly stand in front of them. As the TV continues to play, each side eyes each other expectantly.

"Harrison Ford," Mike says awkwardly as he motions to the screen.

Lucas eyes him.

"Remember when we all dressed up as Star Wars characters in the seventh grade?" Mike ventures hopefully.

"Yeah," Lucas replies, voice flat, "I wanted to be Han, but you said that you were already being Han, and then you made me be Lando."

Right.

"Right," Mike coughs, tugging at his collar a little.

"What do you want, Mike?" Max says, sounding bored.

Mike glances back at Dustin and Will, who give him encouraging nods before he steps forward and looks Lucas right in the eye. "I wanted to officially say that I was sorry," he says as sincerely as possible, "I drew first blood, I was a shitty bandmate and friend, and I'm really, *really* sorry."

Lucas has his arms crossed again as he slumps back on the couch. He still looks totally pissed but he's not like, kicking Mike out or anything, which has to be a good thing, right?

"Plus, we really need you!" Dustin chimes in, "*Both* of you! We got our first gig ever and it's in four days —"

"Wait, *what?!*" Mike, Lucas, and Max exclaim at once.

"We got a gig?!" Max gasps.

"Yeah!" Dustin blinks, looking a little startled, "Halloween night at Indiana U! It's a music fest! Steve hooked it up for us and everything!"

"Holy shit," Max murmurs, looking a little dazed, "An actual *gig!*"

"Dude!" Mike gapes, "Why didn't you tell me this before?!"

"I'm sorry!" Dustin yelps, "I guess I forgot!"

Lucas turns to Mike. "Wait, you didn't know?"

Mike turns back to Lucas and shakes his head.

"So, you're not just apologizing because you want me to do the gig?" Lucas asks carefully.

"No, this is the first I've heard about it, I swear!" Mike insists, "I came to apologize because I feel bad, okay?"

Lucas gives him a challenging look, wordlessly signaling him to continue.

Mike takes a second to think over his words, but when he finally proceeds, he realizes that all his planning goes right out the window and what comes out is an emotional, slightly disorganized blurb of a speech.

"Look, I never should have assumed that I was the lead guitarist. I should have asked you how you felt about things instead of just taking over. I mean, we could have been sharing the spot this entire time, but I was so wrapped up in my own shit that I didn't care. And I think the reason I wanted to be lead so bad was because my life kinda sucks right now and it just felt nice to be in control of *something*. But that's no excuse because I hurt you and I hurt everyone else and acted like an ass. You're a good lead — you did an awesome job at practice last time but I was acting stupid and jealous and I insulted you when you were actually doing really good. I miss you and I don't want to lose you, or anyone else ever. I'm also sorry that I lied about El, I shouldn't have broken the band's rules because they matter and you all matter and I need you guys."

After he's done, Mike stops to catch his breath. A part of him is too scared to look at Lucas, too scared to see what his reaction is. But a larger, more compulsive part of him can't look away, either. He looks at Lucas nervously, wringing his hands together without even really realizing that he's doing it.

"I'm sorry too!" Dustin adds hastily, "I never should have said that you're not like John Lennon because you're not the lead guitarist. I was also being a jerk. Also, Mike's right, you were a really good lead."

Lucas offers Dustin a small smile before his face settles back into a reflective frown. He processes Mike apology for a moment before he averts his gaze to his feet. "You really were an ass," he mutters, "I mean, we were supposed to be friends, but instead you just made me feel like shit all the time."

Mike, thinking back to his problems at home, swallows thickly.

"I just felt like you didn't care," Lucas continues, "Like, every time I tried to talk to you about it, you'd just ignore me. That just made everything worse."

Mike looks down, shame rolling off of him in waves. He feels like he wants to cry but the tears don't come — instead, his eyes just burn and his mouth feels dry.

"Do you even know how that makes someone feel?" Lucas asks, looking up at him.

Your mother and I just have some issues that we can't work out.

Mike nods. "Yeah. I do now." He stops for a minute, takes a deep breath, and meets Lucas' gaze. "And that's why I'm here. I know that what I did was wrong. It's not just recently, either, it's been going on for awhile, but I'm going to change, I promise. No more lies, no more shutting you out. You're my best friends and I think it's time that I start acting like it."

Lucas studies him for a moment. Max is smiling beside him, and seconds later, Lucas joins her. "Okay," Lucas says simply, and that's that.

"HELL YEAH!" Dustin cheers, pumping his fist in the air. That earns a laugh out of the group, and before long Lucas and Max are standing up and everyone's moving in for a big group hug.

"I missed your big dumb head," Max mumbles into the hug, nudging Mike.

"I missed your murder van," Mike teases back.

Max snorts and the group pulls apart to smile at each other. The world finally feels right again, like everything was upside down before. Everything's finally back the way it should be, well, except for —

"Wait, what about El?" Max asks, looking around the group, "Where's she?"

"Mike said she was busy," Will shrugs.

"Bullshit," Max scoffs, "Since when is El too busy for Mike?"

Mike avoids eye contact with anyone, suddenly feeling like he's

gonna be sick. "El's not coming," he says, voice low with remorse.

His friends' give him worried looks. "What? Why?" Dustin asks.

"Because," Mike mutters, shuffling his feet, "Because...she broke up with me."

"Wait, for *real*?!" Max exclaims, "Why?"

"She felt guilty about lying to you guys and thought that the fight was all her fault," Mike pouts, "Also, she was mad at me for coming up with the whole lying plan in the first place."

Dustin and Lucas exchange reluctant glances. "I guess it didn't help that we pinned a lot of it on her," Dustin mumbles.

"Yeah," Lucas admits, "...Listen, Mike, I'm sorry too. I was rude to El and the whole anti-dating thing was dumb. She is a real member of this band and we need her too."

"I couldn't agree more," Max smiles.

"Me either!" Will contends.

"So, let's go get her!" Dustin grins.

"It's not that easy!" Mike exclaims, "We really hurt her feelings!"

"So, we have to really, really, make it up to her," Dustin muses.

"Okay, how?" Lucas asks curiously.

"Anyone got any ideas?" Max asks.

The band members think for a moment, all contemplating the best way to make things up to El.

"What if we got her some flowers?" Will suggests.

"That's not original enough," Mike pouts.

"We could take her bowling again!" Max offers.

"That's something we've already done though," Mike points out.

"I got it!" Dustin exclaims, "We could like, pick out a cheesy song, and serenade her!"

"That's literally not going to happen," Lucas states firmly.

"Yeah, that'd be way too embarrassing," Mike nods quickly.

"Well, I don't see anyone offering any *better* ideas," Dustin huffs, folding his arms across his chest, "Plus, it's unique and it's something we've never done before."

"*Please* no," Lucas pleads.

"Does anyone else have any other ideas?" Mike asks desperately, "*Anyone?*"

The band members all look at each other wordlessly before turning their gazes to Mike.

Mike sighs resolutely. "...Shit."

Hopper has the night shift tonight, which means that El is spending Sunday evening alone, practicing *Blackbird* in her room. Even though the band is broken up now, she's realized that she actually does enjoy playing the guitar, even if doing so drudges up so many painful memories in the process.

She's sitting cross-legged on her bed, her guitar in her lap and her sheet music off to the side. Her brow is furrowed in concentration as she tries to hit the notes just right. Her lips murmur the lyrics in time to the music, though as she continues to flub more notes, her singing sounds increasingly agitated.

El doesn't want to admit that she misses him, or needs him, or that

(she'd be worse off without him)

she shouldn't have broken up with him, because that makes everything all the more painful. Like, it's one thing to be justified in

her actions, it's another thing to be awake tossing and turning at night because *what if* she made the wrong decision?

Despite all that, as much as she hates to admit it, guitar playing was so much easier when Mike was here to walk her through everything. She ultimately decides to give up, or take a break, or whatever, and sets her guitar aside. She flops back on her bed, holding her favorite teddy bear close to her chest.

Hopefully, the others will still be able to make things up. She still feels awful for splitting them up. After all, they've been friends since *kindergarten*. They deserve each other! El deserves to be alone like the lame loner she's always been.

Maybe she'll watch more movies tonight. She's pretty sure she's already watched and rewatched all the VHS tapes she owns over the past week, but maybe she could catch something on TV — there might even be some leftover ice cream in the fridge.

Just as El's debating whether or not she has enough effort to make the trip all the way downstairs, she hears the sudden slide of a keyboard, followed by the upbeat pluck of guitar strings.

At first El's pretty sure she's hallucinating — maybe all her lonely wallowing finally turned her insane — but then she realizes that no, she's actually hearing music, and yes, it's coming from *outside her window*.

El drops her teddy bear and runs toward the window, peering out into the dark backyard. To her surprise, the rest of the band has set up their instruments right on the grass, amps and all. They're jamming away enthusiastically, and it's then that El recognizes the song they're covering: *I Want You Back* by the Jackson 5.

She probably should be furious. After all, all of them, except for like, Will, treated her pretty badly.

And yet...El can't bring herself to be mad. Not when they're *here* and they're *back* and she missed them all *so much*.

El opens her bedroom window and smiles out at them, absolutely

beaming.

Dustin spots her looking out at them and grins. "Yes! She's home!" He calls out over the music, "That would have been awkward if she wasn't!"

"It's still pretty awkward!" Lucas blushes.

Will and Max wave to El before continuing their music. El waves back at them before her eyes land on Mike, who's looking...terrified, to say the least. He can barely meet El's gaze and when he eventually does, he totally screws up the note he's playing. Thankfully, the band ends the song only a few bars after she opens the window, so he doesn't have that much of an opportunity to mess up the song any further. As the song comes to an end, the band members turn to look at her hopefully.

"What are you guys doing?" El giggles, resting her hands on the windowsill.

Dustin turns to the others and nods like he's motioning for them all to go *ahead*. "We want you back!" He, Will, and Max say together, smiling hopefully.

"W-we want you back!" Mike says nervously, a couple seconds behind everyone else.

"We *really* do," Lucas grimaces, looking beyond embarrassed.

"Also, we bought slushies!" Max calls out. On cue, she and the other band members hold up their slushie cups. Mike has one in each hand and gives El a shy smile as he holds them up to her.

When El ultimately decides to let them inside, maybe it's due to the fact that she's really sick of crying over a bowl of ice cream all night, or that she's watched *Sixteen Candles* three times over the past 6 days, or that music doesn't sound the same when she's alone, or that Mike looks unfairly adorable in his striped shirt, a hoodie, and jeans.

Or maybe it's just because she really, *really* wants them back too.

After El helps them unplug all the extension cords and pack the instruments back into Max's van, she brings the band members to her living room. The five of them all cram to sit by each other on the couch while El sits across from them on a loveseat. The sight reminds her of some kind of late night talk-show set-up, which makes her smile a little bit.

As Mike takes his seat, he hands a slushie to El. Their fingers brush in the process, and for a moment it feels like nothing has changed. They're right back in Radio Shack, exchanging shy glances. They're sneaking around their friends again, daring to see what they can get away with without getting caught.

Of course, everything has changed. They all know that. Now it's just a matter of what they're going to *do* about it.

There are a few moments of awkward silence as they all settle themselves into their seats. El takes a few sips of her slushie and is happy to note that Mike got her all three flavors. She lifts her gaze to smile at him gratefully, but Mike is glancing around the room sporadically and drumming his leg on the floor, clearly still nervous.

"So..." Will says, clearing his throat.

It's just a single simple word, but it seems to break the ice between everyone, at least a little bit.

"So, listen, El," Dustin begins, sliding forward on the couch, "I'm a jerk."

El gives him an apprehensive look. "You're not a jerk," she says politely.

"No, he is," Lucas insists.

"Hey!" Dustin pouts.

"But I am too," Lucas continues, giving both El and Dustin pointed looks, "I never should have said you weren't a real member of our band, or that you were a traitor."

"And I never should have said you were Yoko Ono," Dustin adds,

"You're not Yoko Ono, you're someone super cool like...Janis Joplin or Stevie Nicks!"

"Thank you?" El replies, mostly sure that that's a good thing.

"Anyway," Lucas continues, "We both tried to push you out of the band without giving you a fair chance, and we're sorry. The fight wasn't your fault, it was 100% ours."

"And I'm sorry too," Mike pipes up. He's still blushing bright red, but he's finally able to look her in the eye as he speaks, "I shouldn't have forced you to lie to everyone else. You were right, we all should have been honest with each other from the beginning."

"And I'm sorry," Max cuts in with a grin, "that our boyfriends are idiots."

"Hey!" Mike and Lucas exclaim indignantly, turning to frown at her.

"And I shouldn't have let their drama affect our friendship," Max continues, ignoring them, "You were right, you shouldn't have had to choose between us."

"I'm sorry," Will remarks dryly, "That our friends are so dramatic."

El stifles a laugh by taking a long sip of her slushie. As the syrupy ice crystals dissolve on her tongue, she takes some time to process everyone's apologies. The others are looking at her, their anxiety written plainly on their faces. She wants to forgive them, but she still needs one more question answered first...

"Can I ask you something?" El asks, looking at Dustin and Lucas.

They both nod. "Yeah, anything," Dustin replies.

El feels a little embarrassed, but proceeds to ask, "Why didn't you like me? I feel like ever since I got here, you two didn't want anything to do with me."

Dustin and Lucas eye each other reluctantly, shoulders drooped with shame. "I guess..." Lucas begins carefully, "We were stubborn?"

"I felt like Mike was picking you over us," Dustin explains, "And I felt left out."

"And I was so busy being pissed at Mike," Lucas says, "That I kinda just lumped all my feelings toward him with you."

"Basically, we both had our own shit going on," Dustin summarizes, "And we took it out on you, which made us look like we had intelligence scores of 0."

"You *do* have intelligence scores of 0," Max smirks.

"But we're not going to do that anymore," Lucas continues, giving his girlfriend a light-hearted nudge, "We talked things out —"

"Lucas and I are going to take turns taking lead," Mike provides, "And we're not going to keep secrets from each other anymore."

"And I'm going to try to stop getting so jealous," Dustin adds.

El smiles shyly at them, eyes flitting to each one them. "Promise?"

The boys nod and all three of them look so sincere, El can't help but believe them. They do really seem sorry, and it sounds like whatever drama they had going on amongst themselves has since been resolved. She didn't ruin everything and even better, they're finally willing to accept her.

El feels so happy she wants to explode. Instead, she settles for a warm grin. "Okay!"

"So, you'll rejoin the band?" Dustin asks eagerly.

El nods. "Yes!"

Her friends cheer excitedly, which causes El to blush. As they set down their slushie cups on the coffee table and exchange high-fives, El feels bubbly from head to toe. Her insides feel like they're radiating with a blissfully warm light, like summertimes and daydreams and Saturday mornings.

They rise up out of their seats and all rush toward each other in a big

group hug. El giggles as she gets squished by her friends (*friends!*) and soon the others are laughing too. After a few moments, they pull away and smile at one another.

"This is so great!" Dustin beams, "We're all back together again!"

"Well, not *all* of us," Will says quietly, giving the group a pointed look.

The group looks puzzled for a second, but then their gazes move toward Mike and El.

"Ooooooooooh," Dustin says obviously, "Right!"

El and Mike both blush bright red as the others fail to conceal their grins.

"Why don't we go check out the kitchen?" Max suggests, a little too loudly, "*Right*, guys?" She nudges Lucas and motions for Will and Dustin to follow her.

"Yeah, I love kitchens!" Will smiles.

"Me too!" Dustin says, failing to suppress his giggles.

"Subtle, guys," Lucas smirks.

The others head down the hallway to El's kitchen, leaving Mike and El alone in the living room, aka, currently the most awkward location on the entire planet. The entire universe, probably.

El's pretty sure her body is one blush away from just...combusting. She feels so nervous and excited and NERVOUS and shy and *why is she so nervous*, this is just MIKE — though maybe that just answers her own question — and now she can't even think straight and yup, she's definitely going to explode all over the living room and all over Mike and it's going to be so *embarrassing*.

They're both just standing awkwardly in place, about two feet away from each other. Mike's taking his hands out of his hoodie, only to put them right back in, while El wrings her own hands together.

Someone needs to say *something*.

"I think—" El begins.

"I wanna—" Mike starts at the same time.

They both stop and exchange bashful smiles.

"Sorry," they say together, before repeating in unison, "Sorry!" That gains a laugh out of both of them and as they laugh together, El feels some of the tension within her slowly deflate.

"We're doing it again," She mumbles shyly, glancing up at him.

"Your dad would be so annoyed," Mike adds.

They laugh once more. It feels so natural, familiar, and well-missed, like coming home after a long trip away. God, how she'd missed this. Laughing with Mike, being with Mike, looking up into Mike's eyes, blushing under Mike's gaze...

Before she can stop herself, she voices her thoughts aloud and confesses, "I missed you."

Mike looks surprised, then happy, and finally hesitant. "You did?" He asks hopefully.

El gives him a wry smile in return. "Yes. A lot. I kept —" her voice falters and she stops, face suddenly feeling warm.

Mike eyes her. "You kept what?"

El glances at him shyly before she covers her face with her hands and mumbles, "I kept daydreaming that you'd come in all wet from the rain and we'd make up and it'd be like a movie."

She peeks out through her fingers in time to catch Mike grinning at her. "Well, it's not raining outside right now, but if you really wanted, I could like, jump into your shower quick."

El bursts into a laugh that's full of relief, delight, and a kind of endearing affection. "You're so dumb," she giggles, lowering her

hands.

"You love it," Mike grins, leaning forward to poke her arm lightly.

I love you, El wants to say. This time though, she manages to stop herself — she doesn't want to move too fast, too soon. Instead, she bites down on her lower lip and gives him a tentative glance. "I...I'm sorry I broke up with you."

"Don't be," Mike says, then at the puzzled look El gives him, he adds, "I think I needed it. I was being really mean to my friends, and even though it sounds kinda weird, I think I needed to lose them in order to realize how much I needed them, you know?"

El nods understandingly. "I know."

"Also," Mike says after a brief hesitation, "I missed you a lot too."

Their gazes land on each other's, but this time it isn't like all the other times tonight. It feels solid and secure and more *permanent* somehow like

(home)

things are finally going to be okay between them again. Like they were made for each other and they've always been destined to come back together, and whatever other cheesy nonsense El's read in her romance novels.

She suddenly realizes that during this entire conversation, the two feet between them has been reduced by half and is continually getting smaller. She wasn't even aware of this happening, it's as if her body is just slowly drifting closer to Mike by its own accord. Their feet are toe-to-toe. Their fingers are brushing against each other. Time is standing still, and she's pretty sure that the only place that exists in the entire universe is the space between them.

"Mike?" El swallows.

"Yeah?" Mike murmurs.

And she kisses him. She has to stand on tiptoe to reach him, but the

strain of her legs is easily forgotten when Mike wraps one arm around her waist and curls his other hand in her hair. He tastes like her slushie and she realizes that he probably got all three flavors too, because *of course* he did. It feels like they're right back in the backseat of his car again, only this time it's *so, SO* much better. No more secrets, no more hiding.

His mouth is warm and comforting. El can feel him smiling into the kiss, which makes her smile, which makes Mike laugh, which makes El laugh, and before long they're both pulling back to laugh only to move back in for more giggly kisses. They probably look insane. El could care less.

They're interrupted when their friends peek their heads back into the living room. "Awwwwwww!" The other four croon, followed by some exaggerated kissing sounds from Lucas and Dustin.

"Screw you guys!" Mike exclaims as he and El part, though he's beaming from ear-to-ear.

"So, you guys good?" Max asks as they step back into the living room.

El and Mike exchange a heart-eyed nod before lacing their fingers together. "We're good," El smiles contently.

"Good!" Dustin smiles back, "Because we've got a show to plan and only 3 days to do it!"

El freezes. "*Wait, what?*"

[A/N]:I wanted to apologize for such a long wait in between chapters. I kinda talked about this on my Tumblr, but I've really been struggling with writing lately. It's been a long, uphill battle, but I wanted to thank anyone who's still invested in this story. Thank for you reading, commenting, and sticking around. I promise the wait for the last chapter won't be as long! 3

9. Where the Story Ends

[A/N]: In advance, I wanted to say thanks for everyone's patience with this story. I've really been struggling with writing for the past 2 months. I haven't been able to finish anything concrete. And then suddenly today, I was completely inspired. I sat down and wrote this entire chapter in one day. That's the life of a writer I guess?

Anyway, I know this chapter has been a long time coming, hopefully it's somewhat worth the wait. Enjoy, and again, thank you so much!

It's Thursday, Halloween, and the band can't sit still. The school day seems to drag on even longer than usual, and they all find themselves staring at the clock more than their actual schoolwork. They spend all of lunch (which is eaten in the cafeteria with everyone else, despite Max's proposal to crash the Wizard of Oz set) rehashing their plan for the evening: head to Mike's house right after school, run through one last rehearsal, load up the instruments, hit the road, stop for dinner, blow everyone's socks off, maybe even get a record deal (though the last one was filed under 'wishful thinking').

When the last bell of the day *finally* rings, it's a mad dash to their lockers. Some of the other kids are eyeing them all weird, but the band is way too amped up on excitement to care.

"Alright, guys, this is it!" Dustin grins. He's bouncing in place as everyone hastily shuffles items in and out of their lockers, "T-Minus 7 hours and counting!"

"More like 6," Will points out, "Since we should be there to set up before the show starts."

"*SHIT*, you're right!"

"We gotta move!" Lucas exclaims as everyone grabs the last of their things and slams their locker doors shut.

"I bet I can beat you guys back to my house!" Mike challenges. He has a mischievous glint in his eye similar to the one he had when he

challenged Lucas to a bowl-off.

Lucas looks equally excited by the prospect. "You're so on!" He grins. He and Max turn to look at each other, exchanging a knowing smirk, and with that, they take off running down the hallway and toward the parking lot.

"Cheaters!" El gasps with an incredulous laugh.

"Come on, El!" Mike beams, motioning for her to come over to him.

El slings her bag over her shoulder, starts running, and jumps onto Mike's back. Once she wraps her arms around his neck and Mike has a secure grip around her legs, Mike takes off running after Max and Lucas, piggybacking El along with him.

"No fair!" Dustin calls out after them, "Me and Will have bikes!"

"You can ride with us!" Max calls over her shoulder, "Hurry up!"

By the time Dustin and Will make it to Max's van, Mike and El are already zooming out of the parking lot with a squeal of car tires. El's laughing so hard her lungs hurt as Mike whips out of the school parking lot and speeds down the streets of Hawkins. Fallen brown leaves whip upward and spin in the air as their car rushes past. The windows are down and the wind is making their hair fly in all sorts of directions. It feels like they're Bonnie and Clyde and she adores it.

"We're so gonna beat them!" Mike says gleefully, glancing in his rearview mirror.

"You're crazy!" El exclaims.

It's really sudden and unexpected, the three things that happen next.

The first thing is that Mike turns to glance back at her. He sees how her brown hair is whipping in the wind and how some strands are glowing a soft honey-golden in the autumn sunlight, how her cheeks are flushed from smiling and laughing so much, and how she's looking back at him with complete and utter adoration. How he realizes how truly free and light she makes him feel, like they could do anything and be anything.

The second thing is that he tells her he loves her. It's just a blurted, heat-of-the-moment sort of declaration, but he means it wholeheartedly. He doesn't get to see or hear El's reaction though, on account of the third thing.

Which is that they hear a police siren.

Mike and El immediately look over their shoulder to see a police vehicle tailing them, lights flashing and siren still blaring. Mike turns to glance back at the speedometer and — *shit* — he's going 20 over the speed limit.

"Shit," Mike groans, dread rising in his throat and making him feel sick. He pulls over to the side of the road, puts the car in park, and turns off the engine.

"Don't worry," El assures him, placing a hand on his knee. "All the officers know me since I'm the chief's daughter."

"Yeah, but what if they still give me a ticket?" Mike asks worriedly, palms clammy and heart racing, "My parents will kill me."

"I'll still talk to my dad, I'm sure he can—"

There's a knock on the side of the car that causes both Mike and El to jump in place, eyes wide.

"License, registration, proof of insurance," a familiar voice says.

El and Mike turn to look toward the driver's side window, and low and behold, Hopper kneeling there, looking way too pleased with himself.

"Dad!?" El exclaims.

"*Eleanor*," Hopper counters.

Mike swallows. He's not sure if Hopper being the officer to pull him over is a good or bad thing. "H-Hey Mr. Hopper, uh, sir," he gulps.

Hopper raises an eyebrow at Mike. "You wanna tell me why you were going 65 on a 45 street, kid?"

Mike opens his mouth to reply, but nothing comes out other than strangled-sounding air.

"We were racing," El offers meekly, craning her neck to be seen past Mike, "Max and Lucas. We have a concert tonight! Remember, I told you about it yesterday? We have to hurry back to Mike's house to get the instruments."

El was kinda nervous to tell her dad about the concert, since she feared that he wouldn't let her go all the way out to Indiana U on a school night, but when she did, he seemed happy that she was happy and excited about something again (plus, she's pretty sure he's sick of watching *Sixteen Candles* after so many nights in a row).

Right now though, El's starting to worry she's pressing her luck.

"Right, the concert," Hopper nods knowingly. Even though he still has that satisfied grin on his face, his eyes are narrowed with slight suspicion, or possibly judgment (Mike can't tell and he's honestly too terrified to look Hopper in the eye and find out).

A beat of awkward silence passes between everyone before Hopper raises his hand to motion between them. "So, are you guys...you know, a thing again?"

"Dad!" El yelps, cheeks burning in mortification.

"Hey!" Hopper replies defensively, "Last thing I heard, you were all choked up and crying about him over your ice cream."

"You were?" Mike gapes, torn between laughing and leaning over to hug her. The hint of amusement in his tone doesn't go unmissed though.

"Shut up!" El frowns, the order directed at both of them.

"She was," Hopper teases, "She really missed you, kid."

El really wants to die. She groans and slumps over in her seat, and she can totally *hear* the smile in Mike's voice as he 'awww's'. Why do the two guys she cares about the most have to also be the most irritating ones on the planet?

"I missed her too," Mike continues, more seriously this time. At his change of tone, El stops her slouching and softens, turning her head to watch Mike carefully.

Mike turns to look at Hopper, finally meeting his gaze, though he's still white-knuckling the steering wheel. "And I'm really sorry for hurting her, and speeding, and...everything. I...I'm trying to be a better friend. And..." He pauses, blushing, "...Uh, boyfriend."

Hopper studies him for a moment. He looks almost hesitant, which is kinda confusing to Mike, but then when he speaks, Mike gets why. "I heard about your folks," he says, cautious, but oddly comforting too.

"You did?" Mike pales, "How?"

"Word gets around town."

"Small town," Mike mutters, lowering his gaze.

Hopper snorts. "I'll say."

Another beat of silence. "That's a tough break," Hopper finally continues, "I know...I know it's hard when parents can't stay together." His eyes briefly flit toward El as she feels that dull, albeit familiar jab of pain she gets when she thinks of her mother.

Mike nods sulkily. El has her hand on his thigh again and she's drawing little circles over his jeans. It's a simple touch, but it's immensely comforting, just having her here.

And that's when he realizes something.

"I think..." He begins, swallowing slowly, "I think I'm going to be okay though."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I mean...they fought all the time, and I think...I think they'd be better apart, honestly. Plus, I've got all my friends to help me through it, and El, and yo—" His voice comes to a stop as he looks up at Hopper, embarrassed. Is he overstepping his bounds? "I-I mean—"

But, thankfully, Hopper doesn't seem weirded out or upset. Instead, he just smiles warmly. "No, kid, you got me too," He assures Mike.

Mike smiles back at him gratefully. He wishes he could fully express the gratitude he feels right now, to repay Hopper for his inexplicable kindness toward him, but all he's able to come up with is, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, kid."

El looks at them both contently. "Thanks, Dad."

Hopper nods before exhaling, long and deep. "Alright, you kids better get going."

Mike and El look back at him, shocked. "Wait, you're not going to arrest me?" Mike asks.

Hopper smirks. "Not today."

"Dad!"

"You kids have fun!" Hopper continues to smile, rising to his feet and slapping the roof of the car twice. "Don't do anything stupid! And watch your damn speed."

Mike takes a moment to process the fact that he's not being ticketed or arrested, but when his brain finally comes to speed he turns to lean out the window and call out to Hopper's retreating back. "We won't and I will!"

Hopper gives an acknowledging wave before entering his police cruiser. As he pulls out from behind them and drives off, Mike and El turn to look at each other.

"Well, that was..." El begins.

"A lot." Mike finishes.

El smiles at him before leaning across the dashboard to kiss his cheek. Before she can close the gap though, Mike tilts his head so his mouth can meet hers. El smiles into their kiss and swats his arm

playfully, which only makes Mike grin back.

After a moment, they pull away, cheeks pink and minds fuzzy.

"We should probably get going," Mike mumbles, glancing toward the road, "Lucas definitely beat us by now."

"Yeah," El nods, sitting back in her seat.

Mike turns the engine back on and resumes the drive back to his place, though this time at a much more controlled speed.

They're turning onto Maple Street when El says that for the record, she loves him too.

After Mike and El rejoin the group and endure the teasing they get for being so slow, the band runs over their songs one last time. Their set list includes some of their favorites like *Back in Black* and *Melt With You*, along with some more spooky and fun songs like a cover of the *Ghostbusters* theme song.

Before long, their time is up and it's time to head out. They work together to load up their equipment into the back of Max's van. They agree that, this being their first show, it'd be better if they all rode together, even if that means four of them are going to be riding with the cargo.

"Alright, everyone, into the murder van!" Max announces once the instruments are packed up.

"We really need to get a band logo," Will says as he climbs inside, eyeing the white, windowless vehicle woefully.

"We really need a band name," Dustin adds, following him.

As El gets into the back and Max and Lucas get into the front seats, Holly comes running out into the garage. She's wearing a *Care Bears* onesie and holding an empty trick-or-treating bucket in one hand. Mrs. Wheeler is trailing behind her, tucked in a warm wrap-coat with a cat nose and whiskers drawn on her face with pencil eyeliner.

"Wait, wait, wait!" Holly calls out, rushing over to Mike, "Before I go trick-or-treating with Mom I wanna say 'bye!'"

Mike smiles and leans down to hug Holly. "Thanks, Holls," he says, patting her back affectionately, "Or is it Sunshine Bear now?"

"Funshine!" Holly corrects, hugging him tightly.

"Same difference."

"Nuh uh!"

As Mike pulls away and rises to his feet, he meets his mom's gaze shyly.

"So, you're all packed up and ready to go?" Karen asks. There's a wistful sort of glint in her eye as she looks Mike over.

Mike nods. "Yeah."

Neither of them really know what to say, but oddly enough, that suffices. In the brief silence that passes between them, there's an immense amount of understanding that Mike feels too.

Karen steps forward to cup her son's cheek with a smile. "I'm proud of you," she murmurs.

"Thanks," Mike blushes, and if his friends weren't listening and he didn't feel so awkward, he probably would have told her that he's proud of her, too.

He exchanges hugs with Holly and his mother one last time before heading into the back of the van with his friends.

"Have fun!" Karen calls out with a wave.

"Don't mess up!" Holly adds.

"Gee, thanks!"

Mike closes the back doors of the van and takes his seat on the floor next to his guitar case. El slides over to him and places herself in his

lap, and Mike wraps his arms around her protectively.

"You're like my own personal seatbelt," El giggles.

"Yup," Mike smiles, tickling her sides a little.

El laughs harder which causes Max to scoff from the driver's seat.
"You guys are so sappy."

"They really are," Dustin replies with a playful eye roll, seated across from Mike and El.

"Like gross, sticky, mushy, tree sap," Max adds.

"Less talking more driving, Mayfield," Mike counters flippantly.

Max flips him off before starting the van and pulling out of Mike's driveway. The instruments — along with Mike, El, Dustin, and Will — rattle around the back of the van, but it's actually kind of fun.

...Even if everything and everyone does slide around like crazy whenever Max whips around a curve.

"Hold on!" Max grins upon rounding yet another curve, and okay, maybe she's kinda going out of her way to make the turns tighter, just because hearing everyone's startled exclamations from the back is definitely the funniest thing ever.

"You're terrible," Lucas grins, knowing better.

"You're having fun," Max counters.

"MIKE your bony COLLARBONE just poked my EYE out!" Dustin whines from the back.

"It did not! Dude, that's not even possible!"

"Yes, it is! It just happened!"

"I don't think it did," Will says.

"Just because I don't have collarbones doesn't mean I don't know what it's like to be attacked by one."

Lucas can't help but burst out laughing.

"What?" El calls out. "What's so funny?"

Lucas just shakes his head, still chuckling. "I don't know! You guys are so dumb. And I just love you all I guess."

He receives a unanimous, "*SAP!*" in response.

Halfway to Indiana U, they stop at a Waffle House for dinner. The place is all decked out for Halloween with orange twinkle lights on the walls and little plastic jack-o-lanterns on the tables. Everyone crams into a booth, Will, Mike, and El on one side; Lucas, Dustin, and Max on the other.

While everyone's eating, Mike accidentally lets it slip about his parents' divorce. It's a dumb mistake, really. He's just talking without thinking and makes some offhand comment about how his dad is going to move in with his grandparents for a while, and then all the questions start, and now their waffles are all cold and Mike's finishing up explaining years' worth of events to his friends.

"Wait, so your parents were fighting for *years*?" Max says once Mike finally finishes.

"And you never told us?" Will frowns.

"I'm sorry," Mike mumbles, unable to look at any of them. "I guess...I dunno. I didn't like talking about it."

"But we could have helped you!" Dustin pouts.

"My parents are divorced! Will's, too!" Max points out. "We would have understood."

"I know you would have!" Mike assures them, looking up from his plate, "That wasn't the issue! I guess I just...I just spent so much time wanting things to go back to normal, for them to just get along again, and talking about how much they fought just made it seem so much more...*real*. I just wanted things to be how they always were."

His friends are silent for a moment, taking this in. El's holding his hand under the table, keeping Mike tethered and safe.

"I can see that," Lucas eventually says.

"Change is the worst," Dustin mumbles.

"I dunno," Will says, "Sometimes change is good? I mean, think of what change has given us. This band, El, my coming out..."

"That's true," Dustin admits.

"I agree," Mike nods. He pauses to think over his words carefully before continuing. "I'm done wanting to go back to the past. I just want my family and you guys to be happy, and if nothing ever changed, then no one ever would be."

"God, you're such a nerd," Max says, though her gaze is affectionate, "Talking all philosophical and shit."

"Shut up," Mike smiles, flicking a straw wrapper in her direction.

Max deflects the wrapper and continues talking anyway. "But I guess you're right. I mean, I definitely want change. I don't want to stay in this town forever. I don't care what I'm doing, but I wanna be something more than just sitting on my ass for the rest of my life."

"Me too," Will contends, and the others nod.

"We'll do it," El says firmly, "I don't know how, or what, but I know we'll be somebodies. I just know we'll get beyond where we are right now."

The band is quiet for a bit before Dustin breaks the silence with a light laugh. "Wow, that got really deep, guys," he teases.

"Mike started it!" Max defends, "He's the Sap King!"

Mike opens his mouth to protest, but Will speaks first. "Well, speaking of change," he begins, sitting up straighter in his seat, "I, uh, have some news."

His five friends turn to look at him curiously. "What is it, Will?" Mike asks.

Will blushes. He doesn't know why he feels so nervous to tell them...

...Except he kind of totally does.

"I got a job working at the movie theater!" He smiles, wringing his fingers together as he speaks, "So, I can get you guys discount movie tickets and stuff now."

"Sweet!" Lucas beams.

"I just wanted to save up money for a car," Will goes on, "And — "

"You wanted to work with your CRUSH!" Max grins wickedly.

"AWW!" Dustin croons exaggeratedly.

"Will has a crush!?" Mike exclaims.

"Yeah, keep up Wheeler!"

"Whatever, Max!"

"It's not that big of a deal!" Will cuts in, face burning bright red, "We barely know each other!"

"That can change," El smiles, glancing at Mike.

"I give it a week," Dustin comments, sitting back in his seat, "Until they'll be all over each other."

"What?!" Will yelps.

"Make it two," Lucas says with a shake of his head, "Will's gonna spend the first week just working up the courage to stand within five feet of him."

"You guys are the worst," Will groans, but he's still smiling as he digs back into his plate of waffles.

They've finished eating at Waffle House and are running back to the van when Max suddenly stops in the middle of the parking lot.

"I got it!" She exclaims.

"What?" The others ask, stopping to look back at her.

"A name!"

"Congrats," Mike replies dryly, "So does everyone."

"Lucas, I think your girlfriend has finally lost it," Dustin remarks.

"No, idiots!" Max huffs, rolling her eyes, "A name for the band! I just thought of one!"

Mike eyes her warily. "If it's *Max and the Maxettes*..."

"It's not that!" Max insists, "It's better. I think you guys will like it."

"Well, what is it?" Will asks.

She tells them and for once and at last, the band agrees on a name.

By the time the band pulls into Indiana University, the campus is alive with activity and the Boo-sic Fest is in full swing. Students, some more sober than others, are wandering the campus walkways wearing all sorts of costumes, talking to their friends excitedly, and heading off to various parties.

The band works together to grab their instruments, following the sound of music and a cheering crowd to the central quad. In the middle of the quad is a big makeshift stage with lights and giant amps and wires snaking all over it. There's a group of 3 guys up there right now playing a cover of some Metallica song. The area around the stage is packed with students that all seem much older, cooler, and honestly scarier than expected.

Mike can't help but feel like he's totally out of his depth here. "Where do we go?" He calls out, literally yelling to be heard over the music and the roar of the crowd.

"Backstage!" Dustin yells back, motioning for them all to follow him. They do, and though it takes a lot of effort, they eventually manage to make it behind the stage. There are more students back here, tuning instruments, sitting on the grass, and chatting with each other. A few camping lamps are scattered around the ground for light, giving the area a much more subdued and calming feeling compared to the front side of the stage.

Steve's seated in the grass alongside Nancy and Jonathan, and when he sees the kids approaching, he rises to his feet with a grin. "There you guys are!" He greets, giving everyone a fist bump.

"Sorry we took so long!" Dustin replies, "Max got us lost."

"No, *you* got us lost," Max frowns, "You told me to turn right onto that street and we got totally lost."

"I said turn right here!"

"Exactly!"

"No, as in, turn right where you are."

"That doesn't make sense!"

"Yes, it does!"

"We didn't miss our turn, did we?" Mike asks Steve, raising his voice to be heard over Dustin and Max's bickering.

Steve shakes his head. "This is the second group right now, you guys are going last."

"Ok, good," Lucas replies, looking relieved.

Nancy and Jonathan get up and walk over to greet the band too.

"So, how's Hawkins' resident rockstar doing?" Jonathan asks teasingly as he pulls Will in for a hug.

"*Jonathan!*" Will whines as his brother begins to ruffle his hair.

As Will and Jonathan catch up, Nancy goes over to Mike. "So," she smiles knowingly, "This must be El. My mom told me about you guys."

El blushes, feeling suddenly shy. "Hi. It's nice to meet you."

Nancy pulls her in for a hug. "You're so pretty," she says, "How'd my dweeby brother land you?"

El giggles as she pulls away, but Mike isn't as amused. When El walks over to the others crowded around Jonathan and Steve, Mike glares at Nancy.

"You're hilarious," he glowers, to which Nancy only grins.

"Whatever, Mike," she says, pulling him in for a hug, "I know you missed me too."

"No way," Mike huffs, hugging her back.

"Not even a *little*?"

"Nuh uh."

"Hmph."

As Nancy rubs a hand up and down Mike's back, Mike can't help but ask. "*Do you know?*" He whispers into her ear, voice low so that only she can hear it.

Nancy stiffens slightly, but nods. "Mom called me," she murmurs back. They pull apart from their hug to look one another in the eye, faces set with a reserved sort of sorrow.

"I'm sorry," Nancy finally says, and when she speaks, Mike can tell it's about to crack. "Maybe if I'd been home —"

"Trust me, there's nothing you could have done," Mike sighs, "They had to deal with this on their own, it wasn't about us."

"I guess you're right..." Nancy pauses to compose herself and quirks an eyebrow, "Hey, when did you get so smart?"

"Maybe you just got dumber," Mike counters with a grin.

Nancy bursts into a laugh, giving him a firm nudge. "Douche bag!"

A few feet away, the rest of the band is still talking to the older guys. "Just remember to have fun," Jonathan assure them.

"Yeah, it's not like this is some high-stakes thing, okay?" Steve adds, "Plus, most of the people out there are wasted anyway, so if you suck, they won't even remember it tomorrow."

Jonathan nudges Steve with an almost imperceivable shake of his head. Steve shrugs it off and continues on. "But yeah, have fun and all that shit. You guys are going to do great!"

The band smiles back warily, and even Max can't help but feel the jitters of the whole situation starting to get to her. A few minutes later, the second band finishes and the third steps up to play — only two more acts left.

Nancy and Mike rejoin the group, and everyone takes a moment to listen to the current band playing. They sound even better than the last group, and the crowd really seems to be into it as they sing along to the lyrics and cheer at ear-splitting decibels.

"They're really good," Will says wistfully.

"Yeah, but you guys are even better," Jonathan assures him.

Lucas feels his grip shaking on the strap of his guitar case as he tries to prepare himself. A few days ago, the idea of playing a show seemed nerve-wracking, but slightly doable. Now that they're actually here, it's a completely different story. When he peers his head around the edge of the stage, he can see some of the crowd. They look so *energetic* and almost ravenous as they jump in place, yelling at the top of their lungs. It's all so intense and Lucas is suddenly greeted with the image of all that energy turning against them. Of being humiliated and judged on a grander scale than ever before.

By the time the fifth band is getting onstage, Lucas can't handle the pressure any longer. "Maybe we shouldn't do this," He says anxiously, turning to look at the others.

"What do you mean?" Mike frowns.

"What if we screw up? What if we make giant asses of ourselves and everyone makes fun of us?"

"We've been practicing like crazy," Max replies confidently, "We got this."

"Yeah, but they're all *college kids*," Lucas emphasizes, "It's going to be way different than just us in our garage."

"We played for Steve before!" Dustin points out, "He's a college kid."

"Yeah, but Steve loves us."

"Most of you, anyway," Steve teases.

"What if we get like, 'boo'ed off the stage?" Lucas continues.

"You're not going to get 'boo'ed off of the stage," Nancy states firmly, flicking Steve's shoulder in reprimand.

"It could happen!"

"If they started shouting 'boo,' that'd be a good thing," Dustin says, grinning, "Because it's Halloween."

Everyone turns to give Dustin an unappreciative look, while he laughs at his own play on words.

"I don't know...I'm kind of nervous too," El admits after Dustin's laughs die down, "I've never sung in front of anyone, other than you guys."

"Don't worry about that," Max says with a dismissive shake of her head, "You're going to do great."

"Yeah, you're really good," Will adds, "There's a reason you're in the band."

"Because she was the only one to show up to auditions?" Mike teases, to which El frowns and nudges him firmly. "Kidding!" Mike quickly

insists.

"You guys need to look at the bigger picture," Jonathan cuts in, "Even if tonight goes badly, so what? Do you think every famous musician performed perfectly at their first show? Don't let the fear of what could happen stop you from doing something great."

There's a beat of silence as everyone processes this, until Dustin says, "Yeah, that's really great and all, but I'm with Lucas — it would really suck to get laughed at."

"Oh my god!" Max huffs, placing her hands on her hips and glaring at them all, "The more you guys worry, the more likely you're gonna mess something up. You're psyching yourselves out. We're gonna rock this, okay?"

The rest of the bandmates only give disheartened grumbles in reply.

"Okay?!" Max repeats, eyes narrowed.

"OKAY!" They echo.

"We're amazing, we're talented, we've been practicing for months, and by the time we're done with this place, this Quad is gonna be in flames!"

It's hard to say no to Max. She knows that, and they know that. And right now, Max knows that even though she's scared too, she has to be strong for them. She has to let her friends know that they can do this.

Thankfully, it seems to work. Lucas takes a deep breath and nods, face set. El and Mike exchange soft glances before El stands on tip-toe to kiss his cheek. Will leans his head against Jonathan's side, feeling comforted. Dustin flexes his fingers and arms as if he's already seated in front of the drum set.

With a final, screeching note, the song onstage ends, and the fifth band leaves the stage.

It's time.

"Group hug for good luck!" Dustin calls out quickly, and despite a few squeaks of protest, the group envelopes each other in a big, warm hug.

"When you guys are famous, you better write a song about me," Steve smiles as they all pull away.

"In your dreams, Harrington," Mike grins.

"Perfect title, right there!" Steve says, pointing toward Mike appreciatively.

A few more goodbyes and good luck's are exchanged, the bass and guitars are removed their cases, and before the band has more time to reconsider or second-guess anymore, they're stepping onto the stage.

The lights and noise are blinding as they make their way onto the center of the stage. Though there's probably only 200 to 300 students here, it feels more like a thousand. Maybe even a million.

Will and Dustin take their seats at the drum set and keyboard already onstage.

El stands near the front, gripping the mic tightly. Her heart is racing impossibly fast and she's convinced that the second her mouth opens, she's going to either vomit or just pass out altogether.

But then she closes her eyes. She closes her eyes, takes a breath, and wills herself to drown out the roar of the crowd and the terror of the situation before her. And when she does this, she's right back to that first day, standing onstage in an empty auditorium. It's just her and her five future friends, the people who'd change her life forever.

When El opens her eyes again, she finally knows this is where she belongs.

Mike agreed to let Lucas play lead in their opening song, which means Lucas is front and center with El. There are so many lights shining on them, it's a little hard to see the crowd, but Lucas isn't complaining. It makes it much easier to step forward, take a breath, and speak into the microphone in front of him.

"I'm Lucas," he says, motioning to himself, and then the others, "And this is Mike, El, Max, Will, and Dustin, and we are *Beyond Hawkins*."

There's an appreciative and welcoming round of applause, along with some hearty drunken hollers. Though he's still nervous as hell, Lucas steps back into place and prepares himself to take the lead. *He's got this.*

As the band readies themselves. Mike's not sure how this is going to go. 'This' being not only their music and the audience's reaction, but everything that comes after. This is their first real show, and it might be their last. It might go horribly and they might never play again. Maybe it'll go really well and they'll go on to become famous musicians that sell out shows all over the world. Maybe they'll play this show, go back to their garage, and the band will be left behind in their high school years, a warm and effervescent memory.

It's kinda frightening, really, how uncertain the future can be. How completely unable Mike is to grasp any fraction of it. But as he looks back towards his friends one last time, it feels like things are going to be ok. No matter what the future holds, as long as he has his friends by his side, he's certain they can handle anything that comes their way.

His fingers curl over the neck of the guitar, ready to play the first cord.

El grips the microphone, strong but certain as Will hovers his fingers over his keyboard.

Lucas and Max exchange one last smile, hopeful and reassuring.

Dustin gives his drumsticks four introductory taps.

And they begin.